

Accomplishments
of the Duke's
Daughter

NOVEL

4

Written by **Reia**
Illus. Haduki Futaba



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Accomplishments *of the* Duke's Daughter

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WRITTEN BY

Reia

ILLUSTRATED BY

Haduki Futaba



Seven Seas Entertainment



BERNE DARSHI ARMELIA

The son of the duke and duchess of Armelia. Had feelings for Yuri.



LOUIS DE ARMELIA

Duke Armelia and prime minister. Iris's father.



RUDIUS GIB ANDERSON

Childhood friend and advisor of the First Prince of Tasmeria, Alfred.



MIMOSA DUNGLEY

Iris's best friend. Former classmate from the academy.



EDWARD TONE TASMERIA

The second prince of Tasmeria. Was engaged to Iris.



YURI NEUER

The daughter of Baron Neuer. Acting as the second princess due to certain circumstances.

characters

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

DORSEN KATABERIA

The son of the knight commander. Has a crush on Yuri.



ELLIA

The current queen. Edward's mother.

MONEDA

Vice-treasurer of Armelia and one of the orphans Iris took in.



IRIA FONS TASMERIA

The queen dowager. Retired from public life and resides in the palace.

GAZELL DAZ ANDERSON

Marquis Anderson and general of Tasmeria. Merellis's father.



RAFSIMONS

Priest of the Darryl Church. Backs Iris's faction.



DIDA

Iris's bodyguard. She took him in when he was a child.



LYLE

Iris's bodyguard. She took him in when he was a child.



IRIS LANA ARMELIA

Daughter of the Duke of Armelia. Regained memories from a past life.



REHME

House Armelia's librarian. Iris took her in when she was a child.



TANYA

Iris's handmaid. She took her in when she was a child.



DEAN

Working on contract for the Azuta Corporation. Very talented.



MERELLIS REISER ARMELIA

Duchess Armelia and the Flower of High Society. Iris's mother.



HAFIZ BENT MERSID

An emissary from the country of Acacia who engages with Iris's household.



LETICIA

Dean's younger sister. Very intelligent, has a knack for politics.

KOUSHAKU REIJOU NO TASHINAMI Vol.4

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Chapter 18:

The Duke's Daughter Rejoices in Daily Routine

“IT’S ALMOST SCARY that I’ve grown used to this,” I murmured to myself, surrounded by documents. The *skritch, skritch* sound of my quill scratching the parchment filled the room. There were several mountains of papers on my desk. Not piles. Mountains.

I still had documents from day-to-day business to approve; they had piled up during the business with my excommunication. But at least the amount of work now was nowhere near as bad as it had been during the scandal. Since then, I’d put contingency policies in place in case of another emergency. Ideally, there would never *be* such an emergency again, but I wanted to be prepared just in case.

“Phew... Finally finished.” Both sadly and fortunately, those preparations had recently come to my aid. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

“Dean is the one you should thank. He gave out instructions and dealt with a great many things before he left.”

“Oh? That surprises me; he left in such a rush. I do appreciate it, though.” Deep inside, I felt myself reacting to the mere mention of his name, but luckily, I must not have shown it on my face.

“Excuse me, my lady.” There was a knock at the door, and Tanya entered. She had a somewhat perplexed look on her face. “I have news for you, if I may?”

“Yes, go ahead. I just finished my work. What is it?”

“Well, there are two things. The first is that we have received word that Dorssen has left the knighthood. Furthermore, House Kataberia has begun the process of disowning him. We’re expecting a formal notice from the Kataberias confirming the latter in short order.”

“I see. And what is Dorssen doing now?”

“He disappeared shortly after returning to the capital. Shall I try to find him?”

“No need. He has nothing now. No money, no family honor. The only thing he has left is that strength that he’s worked so hard to hone. And I truly believe that strength won’t be a problem, as long as I have

Lyle and Dida. We don't need to send someone after him, but I do want you to start looking into his actions around the capital."

"Yes, my lady. I'll arrange it right away."

"And the other matter?"

"Van and the nobles involved in the scandal have received their sentence. Van will drink poisoned wine, just as his father did. The other nobles must surrender their status as heads of their families and be confined to their houses permanently thereafter."

"I see," I responded.

"You don't seem very surprised."

"I suspected as much once we handed them to the kingdom to be dealt with." A wry smile crossed my face.

Van was already a commoner with absolutely no backing and nothing left to his name. There was no way he could have conspired against a noble—*especially* one related to the duke and current prime minister—and escape unscathed. If the kingdom let him off easily, it would weaken the means by which it protected itself. Meanwhile, though up until now the Darryl Church had always shielded Van, now he was nothing more to them than a nuisance.

Not to mention, Queen Ellia probably wanted to be rid of him before he opened his mouth and said something he shouldn't.

"I *am* a little surprised that the sentence was passed down so quickly, but I let the kingdom handle them because I had a feeling that they would deal with Van appropriately. I offered to help him once. He turned down that help, and that's his own fault. I don't see the problem with letting him be the scapegoat if it also gets rid of the other nobles who were already standing in my way, do you?"

I was sure that Queen Ellia had never seen Van or any of the rest of the nobility involved with this scandal as anything more than pawns. Van had now more than served his purpose by being fed to the wolves. Furthermore, one of the other nobles being punished controlled the domain north of Armelia. His domain had not only raised tariffs on the duchy, but they had committed multiple infractions against Armelia since, so he had become quite troublesome.

"That's true," said Tanya. "My only regret is that I was unable to get rid of him myself, but I'm glad that I could be of service to you."

That was such a very Tanya thing to say; I couldn't help but laugh. "Thank you for the news. Make sure to confirm that the punishments are actually carried out. I don't want to hear later that he's still alive for some reason. Who knows what would happen then? And Tanya? I'd love to have some tea in the salon while I take a break."

"Of course, my lady." A pleased smile crossed her face. She was always concerned with my health, so she looked relieved that I had offered to take a break of my own accord.

After seeing her smile, I tried to ignore the heavy feeling inside of me and stood. I left the room and shortly arrived in the salon, where I took a seat. A few minutes later, Tanya entered with a cup of tea and set it down in front of me.

"Mm, it's delicious," I said.

"Thank you. I'll excuse myself now, but please do let me know if there is anything I can do for you."

"I will, thanks."

Once I heard her footsteps depart, I let out the deep sigh I'd been suppressing. Then I inhaled the aroma of the herbal tea. *Ahh, so relaxing.*

The moment Tanya informed me of Van's death sentence, I felt a mixture of emotions—joy, relief, resentment, and anger...and pain. All of those emotions combined together, like when you dump a bunch of paint and mix it all up until it becomes a terrible color that you can't begin to describe. This was the nature of the feeling within my chest.

Strangely, my mind was surprisingly calm, all things considered. I had a feeling that once I took this moment to relax, those bad feelings would pass. I looked out the window at the flowers and greenery outside, the sight of them soothing my aching eyes. I hadn't noticed it at all when I was knee-deep in my work, but now that I turned my gaze elsewhere, I realized for the first time just how tired my eyes were.

I need to make sure I take good care of my eyesight. They don't have contacts in this world, after all, I thought to myself as I enjoyed the view.

House Armelia had our own private gardeners, of course. They had planned this view down to the fine details when they designed the gardens, and they worked tirelessly to maintain its beauty. How lucky they were to be able to see such beauty up close every day!

As I sat there by myself, I became lost in thought. I suddenly remembered that I'd received a letter from Mimosa a while back. She had spoken of a fellow she was seeing, one whom she intended to marry. She had always been an exceptionally cautious person when it came to affairs of the heart, but it seemed even she was no match for the power of love. I'd sent off a letter expressing my congratulations and asking about her potential fiancé, but I had yet to receive a response. I had been so wrapped up in the ruckus with the Boltik family that I hadn't had the chance to follow up, but perhaps it was time to write her another letter.

Just then, I saw Dida in the corner of my vision. "Oh, Dida!"

"Hey there, Princess. Taking a break?"

"Yes, I am."

"Got it. I'm gonna hand these documents to Sebastian in a bit, but I need you to look them over for me. It concerns our plan to oversee the security forces going forward. I'm stepping down, but Lyle will still be here, so let him know if you need anything."

"All right. Are you leaving right away?"

"Not right this minute, no."

"Then will you take a break and join me for some tea?"

"If you insist," Dida answered with a grin as he took the seat across from me.

Before I could even say a word, one of the servants who had been waiting in the room poured some tea for him. She was currently a maid in training, a student from the trade school we'd established for those who wished to study between the elementary school and academy for higher education. Currently, those who wished to enroll in the academy had to be studying a dedicated profession like medicine or education, or have aspirations to become a butler, maid, or bodyguard. My family had established the programs for the latter three with our own money.

The programs for butlers and maids had proven incredibly popular, with a high applicant-to-acceptance ratio. Apparently, one of the main attractions was that a student could learn formal etiquette through the program. The students worked in shifts at my estate to get real world experience, and at present, this particular girl was being trained by Tanya.

“Hm? Did Tanya brew this?”

“Yes, I’m surprised you knew.” I raised an eyebrow.

Dida let out a shy, sheepish chuckle. “Yeah, well. Anyway, why did you want me to stay, Princess?”

“Because I have a report for you—although, I suppose that makes it sound more formal than it actually is.” I finished my tea and set it back on the table. I returned my gaze to Dida, who had suddenly straightened in his chair. “Don’t worry, there’s no need to be tense.”

“Then don’t look so serious, Princess.”

“Oh!” I laughed, having not expected him to say that. I hadn’t even realized I was frowning. “I’m sorry. I’ll get right to the point. I heard that Dorssen has left the knighthood.”

I knew that Dida had spent time in Dorssen’s company several times when they were both training with my grandfather, and they had been held captive together during the Boltik episode. Given that connection, I wanted Dida to know before anyone else.

“Is that right?” Dida’s reaction was more matter-of-fact than I’d imagined, almost as if he’d been expecting this.

“You’re not as surprised as I thought you’d be. Don’t tell me you already knew?”

“No, I didn’t. But I had a feeling this would happen.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because of something he said to me before. ‘What does being a knight mean, anyway?’ or something like that.”

“Wha—when did you see him?!”

“Before he left. I was keeping an eye on him.”

“I see. And since you’re not a knight, he asked you what you thought of them?”

“He said Lyle and I fit his mental image of a knight way more than he did. I didn’t understand what he was talking about, and I told him as much.”

“Oh, my.”

“Then he said, ‘I was too preoccupied with my status and grew arrogant. I strayed too far from the person I should have been.’”

“And then what did you say?”

“I asked him who he thought he should’ve been. Because no matter how hard you work, you’re always just gonna be yourself, you know? The real question you should ask is how to be the best version of yourself you can be. You know, how to go about it, how you wanna be. But it seems like he doesn’t have any idea what he wants to do, let alone what he wants to become. Probably that’s because this whole time, he’s just been chasing an ideal without really understanding himself. That’s why he got so preoccupied with his title of ‘knight’ and why he got so cocky about his social status as the son of a count. But in my opinion, most rich noble kids are like that.”

“That’s pretty harsh. Did you tell him all that?”

“Something close to it, anyway. Then he said coming to the duchy had made him think about a lot of things. That the crimes he’d committed were severe and that he knew he couldn’t change the past, so those crimes would stay with him forever, both as a person and as a knight. Said he had to atone for it too. Atone for it, then remember what he had yearned to be for so long, and then try to become that once again.”

“Not a bad plan, in my opinion.”

“You don’t seem too surprised by any of this either, Princess. It sounded like a pretty serious decision to me.”

“It’s not that I’m not surprised. It’s that I’m not interested.”

“That’s awfully cold.”

“I realize that. But that’s the only way I can describe it. I mean, what am I supposed to do after hearing his new manifesto? As long as he doesn’t ask anything of me or the duchy, anything that happens to him simply doesn’t concern me. At this point, I just don’t care about what happened in the past.”

“So you’ve forgiven him?”

“Nothing can change what happened between us. Enduring those experiences changed me as a person, both in good ways and in bad. But, as I said, it’s in the past. I have more important things to dwell on.”

This was true; I had been so busy lately that even when I thought about these things that had happened so long ago, I felt detached from them, almost as if those memories belonged to someone else. I had

more important things to do than ruminate. However, those events were still engraved deeply into my heart. It was in that moment of betrayal that I had regained the memory of my past life and my two selves had combined, but other traumas from those months had left their scars on me as well.

“It doesn’t seem like he’s going to go out of his way to oppose you.”

“If he does, that’s for my subordinates to worry about it. But if he truly has made such a serious decision to better himself, then what he does going forward is crucial...for him. He’s already been asked what kind of person he wants to become, and he’s asked himself the same question. I went through the same thing.”

I was referring to when Dida had asked me if I was prepared for war. It had made me call into question the kind of person I wanted to become and what I wanted for Armelia.

Sometimes, even if we think things are going a certain way, we realize we’ve lost sight of our goals once someone else challenges us. This gives us a chance to refocus. When this happens, some people are weak and search out an easier path. I was no exception.

“So, can he pull through?” I asked. “Can he get back on his feet, having made a mistake, and continue on toward his goal? That’s both the most difficult and important thing, in my opinion.”

“It’s definitely difficult. Even I get indecisive and make mistakes every now and again,” Dida said with a hearty laugh.

“Mm-hmm. Well, anyway, thank you for telling me all this, Dida.”

“No need to thank me. I’d better get going now, though.”

“Of course. I’m sorry I kept you.”

“No worries. Excuse me, then.”

After Dida left, I was once again alone to enjoy a fresh cup of tea. Time passed rather quickly, and before I knew it, the sun was setting. Everything grew still and quiet. I couldn’t help but wonder how long it would last.

“I’ve returned, my lady.” Tanya appeared without so much as a sound.

“Welcome back, Tanya.”

“I did as you told me. Everything is arranged. I’ll let you know right away if there are any developments.”

“Thank you.”

“Our emergency preparations are coming along smoothly. I have my grandfather to thank for that.”

I read through the documents as I listened to the reports from the contractors in charge of construction. Armelia bordered the ocean, and several rivers flowed through the duchy, which made it imperative to take measures against potential flooding.

My grandfather had prepared against flooding on a smaller scale from very early on. Many governors could think up ways to improve their territory to make it richer and enable development, but it was a rare governor who could devise measures to mitigate risks that might happen decades or even centuries down the line. Where natural disasters were concerned, more people seemed to be of the mindset that there was simply nothing to be done to prevent them. They believed that humans were powerless against the strength of Mother Nature. Some even bet on the chance that nothing bad would happen, or simply refused to consider the possibility.

As such, the fact that my grandfather had put measures in place so long ago in hopes that they would someday prove useful just went to show how much he had cared for his citizens, and how much he had loved Armelia. After him, my father had taken control, and I after him.

“That’s all for my report, my lady,” the contractor said.

“I see. Thank you. Once I review everything and make my decision, I’ll deliver my instructions.”

“Lady Iris, may I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Please forgive my presumption, especially since I am the one you’ve tasked to do the job, but are these projects truly necessary?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I’ve never heard of these two rivers flooding. Wouldn’t it be

better to send monetary assistance to the north to aid with cultivating new land, or to fund an expansion of the ports? I feel like either would be much more beneficial to Armelia.”

There was a knock at the door just as he finished speaking, and Rehme entered. “Those rivers *have* flooded, actually,” she said. “One hundred fifty and one hundred years ago, respectively.”

The contractor looked surprised by both Rehme’s sudden appearance and her comments.

“Pardon me for interrupting, Lady Iris. But I’ve come to tell you that I’ve prepared the space for your meeting, as requested.”

“Oh? Thank you, Rehme.”

“Rehme, was it? Pardon me, but how do you know about these floods that you mentioned?”

“Journals from the governors and reports from that time. The reports were especially helpful, as they detailed the extent of the damages and what kind of relief was distributed.”

“You read reports and journals from one hundred fifty years ago? I can’t even imagine how long those reports are. That goes for the hundred-year-old one too...”

“Oh, but that’s not all!” Rehme enthused. “We have journals and documents dating all the way back to the first governor of Armelia!”

“Don’t tell me...”

I couldn’t blame the contractor for being surprised, not only that any documents had been preserved for over a century, but also that someone had taken the time to read them. Just imagining the sheer volume of reading made me lightheaded. Only someone like Rehme could take delight in making her way through the piles and piles of old papers.

“The older flood did the most damage; two villages were completely submerged by the floodwaters. Obviously, everything there was a total loss, so the capital and other territories sent aid to survivors. Thanks to their help, we narrowly avoided a famine.”

“It’s true that the financial investments you suggested would benefit Armelia,” I explained. “But there’s no guarantee that a natural disaster won’t strike sometime in the future.”

“Well...” The contractor seemed speechless.

“Perhaps nothing of the sort will happen in your lifetime. But what of your children’s, or your grandchildren’s? What if something happens, but we’ve taken no measures to mitigate the effects? I don’t intend to live with regrets of ‘I should have done this!’ or ‘I could’ve done this!’ If we act now, we protect your future family. Would you abandon that opportunity?”

“So the purpose of the construction projects is to lower the risk of serious damage in case of future disaster. I understand now. Please forgive my rudeness for speaking out of turn and interfering with your duties as the governor.”

“It’s no trouble at all. You’re perfectly correct to question me. I realize now that I neglected to adequately explain my reasoning for the projects. If you have any other questions in the future, please don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“By the way...you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. So much so that I’d like to hire you—not as a contractor, to be clear. I’d love to have your perspective as an official for the duchy.”

“Actually, I’ve attended the academy at the suggestion of my father. It was the trade school, of course, but occasionally I sneaked into the classes for bureaucrats and listened in on them. I found myself quite interested.”

“Really! Ha ha. You’ve truly gotten good use out of the academy, then, haven’t you? Well, in that case...do you have a bit more time to spare? I’d love for you to stay on for the meeting.”

“A-are you sure, Lady Iris?” The contractor’s eyes sparkled, his expression eager.

“Yes, of course.”

The content of the day’s meeting was contained within the documents he was currently holding. There was nothing in there of a sensitive nature unsuitable for his eyes.

“Rehme. Prepare another seat at the table.”

“Yes, my lady.” Rehme left for a few minutes and then returned shortly to tell me everything was ready.

I urged the contractor to follow me. An entire wing of the mansion was dedicated to business for running the duchy. Many Armelian officials were there, briskly attending to their duties. The contractor looked around with interest as he walked behind me. Before long, we arrived at the meeting room, where five elderly men and two Armelian officials were waiting for us.

“Thank you so much for meeting with me here today, everyone. Without further ado, let’s get started. Go ahead and look over the documents in front of you. I’d love to hear your opinions.”



“Things seem to be going according to plan. I visited the site, and it looks just how you envisioned it.”

“Don’t you think our side of the levee should be finished faster? If things continue on like this, we’ll put too much of a burden on the other side.”

The five elderly men looked over the construction reports and exchanged opinions on them. There was just so much I didn’t know. It made me regret not spending more time in Japan cultivating more skills and knowledge. Then again, I had no time for regrets. I only had one pair of hands and eyes and only one brain. I couldn’t learn everything in the world myself. That was why I had decided to surround myself with people who could supplement the knowledge that I lacked.

Everyone has different interests. Everyone’s appetite for knowledge is stimulated by different things. Some people analyze and study practices in the past that have been generally neglected, such as flood prevention, and some dream of putting their skills to use by building aqueducts to bring water to crops. I had gathered all those people together to have discussions like this one.

These days, it was even easier to find those people hungry for knowledge, now that I had established the academy. I suspected this was also due to the request I had made to Headmaster Luka to make the academy library open to the public, to which he had agreed.

I’d had dozens of meetings like this so far, but at first, the attendees hadn’t been as open with their discourse as they were now. Once they realized that they could make their dreams a reality and see the fruits of their studies and plans, I saw the light catch in their eyes, and a new readiness to share their opinions bloomed forth. They began to exchange their opinions with each other, together generating even better ideas than they’d had to begin with. Since they were all so passionate about their interests, it was my job to manage the meetings and keep them all on task.

After we’d gone through basically everything, I called the meeting to a close. “I think it’s time to give out instructions. Luckily, we have someone from the contracting firm here, so I’ll check with him on this detail; how is the workforce replenishment coming?”

Even though I sprang the question on him without warning, the contractor readily answered without showing a hint of apprehension.

“We’ve used several subsidies to hire day laborers. But we’re still scraping by at a bare minimum. If we need to get the job done faster, then we’ll need to hire more people.”

“Speaking on behalf of Borsa, it would be quite difficult to allocate any more of our budget toward this construction project.”

“I see. However, the problem here is that these workers aren’t accustomed to doing a job like this, so accidents have occurred more frequently, and quite a few people have been injured on the job. If these injuries continue, we’ll have a harder time retaining our workforce. Honestly, I’d like to be in a position where we can keep replenishing our people.”

“What’s happened to those who were injured?”

“They’re recovering at home or in the hospital.”

“And who’s paying for the cost of their treatments?”

“They’re covering the cost themselves, of course.” The contractor gave me a curious look, as if he wondered why I had asked such an obvious question.

“Hmm. Let me think about what we can do for that situation. But let’s adjourn this meeting for today. Thank you so much, everyone.”

After I called the meeting to a close, everyone reached for a drink. There had been much enthusiastic debating today, so everyone seemed to be parched. After everyone gulped down their drinks, they stood up and left.

“What did you think?” I asked the contractor who I’d brought with me.

He gave me an excited look. “I learned so much. Everyone’s enthusiasm lit a fire in my soul!”

“Really? I’m so pleased to hear that.” His eyes and voice were so earnest that they put a smile on my face.

“Thank you so much for allowing me to have such a wonderful experience.” With that, he excused himself.

Once he was gone, I looked down at the documents again. “Injured workers, hmm...”

“Is something the matter, Lady Iris?” Rehme asked from beside me.

“No, I was just thinking.”

“If there’s something on your mind, feel free to ask me any questions you might have. Speaking of catastrophes, though, I think it would be prudent to be wary of them this year.”

“Have you already seen some signs?”

“No, no, not at all. But it’s common in this kingdom to see several months of hot weather followed by long periods of heavy rain, especially in the western regions, maybe once every hundred years or so. It’s never affected Armelia, so it’s generally none of our concern, but I thought I ought to let you know.”

“Thanks. Could you write a more detailed report on that phenomenon and deliver it to me later?”

“Of course!”

“Wonderful. I have a feeling I’m going to be relying on you a lot from now on, Rehme.”

I reviewed all the fine details of the documents before me, filled them in, and signed.

“My lady, I have a letter for you.” I looked up as Tanya handed me the letter.

“Oh? I wonder who it’s from. Ah, my father. He’s included a letter from Lord Kataberia.”

Tanya visibly reacted to the mention of this name with a frown. Count Kataberia was Dorssen’s father, of course. It was clear that she was wondering about the contents of the letter. I smiled wryly at her reaction and read the letter from my father first.

“Father says, ‘Now we can reconcile.’ Hm? Reconcile what?” I took out the letter from Count Kataberia next. “Oh!” I let out a cry of surprise as I read it.

“What does it say, my lady?”

“Basically, I suppose you could say it’s a letter of apology. He didn’t sugarcoat it either; the sentences are all extremely frank and

straightforward. Remember how Father sent a formal objection to Lord Kataberia when Dorssen came to Armelia? This is in response to that. It says the count has left the knighthood of his own accord, and that not only has he disinherited and disowned Dorssen, but he's asking for our two families to bury the hatchet. I have to wonder what manner of objection Father sent to him..."

"Your father and mother were quite angry with Dorssen over his actions toward you when the prince broke your engagement."

I was surprised to hear this news from Tanya. Quite some time had passed since then, so why was I finding this out just now? "Is that true?"

"Of course. You're a lady, the daughter of a duke, and you were pinned down and injured. No matter what the second prince said, since at that time no official notice had yet been given, you were still in line to become a princess. A future member of the royal family."

"True."

But right after that, the royal palace had issued an official notice informing everyone that my engagement with the second prince was terminated. It was only a formality, of course, because I was almost certain that they had decided to break off the engagement the moment Yuri got Queen Ellia involved. Still, before that happened, and at the moment when Dorssen had me pinned down on the floor, I had indeed still been a future member of the royal family—and I had been and remained the daughter of the duke who was the prime minister.

"So in that regard, Dorssen committed a serious faux pas. I suppose you could call Lord Kataberia's quickness to say he would immediately correct his son's behavior an act of kindness on his part, but I'm sure it was also a way to protect himself. But Elulu told me that the duke, and especially your mother, were incredibly angry about it."

"My..."

"When your mother lived at her family's house, she had many interactions with the knights who admire Master Gazell. That's why she was so much angrier than she might otherwise have been when Dorssen misused his status as a knight. Supposedly, she said, 'It's a disgrace to the knightly code of honor. Would a knight use force against a feeble woman? I have to question the judgment of a knight commander who would welcome someone like that into the ranks of his knights to begin

with. It's forgivable because you're going to correct him, you say? His particular behavior is the outcome of your two decades of raising him, so what in the world are you talking about? Forgiving him is the same as doing nothing at all. In the end, he gets to keep the job and live the life he wanted all along. So he suffers absolutely no consequences. When did our family become so scorned?' After that, she declared that she would no longer attend any party hosted or attended by the Kataberias."

"Mother..." Hearing my mother's words relayed by Tanya made the depth of her anger sink in.

"So the count has left the knighthood... In that case, does the vice-commander take over?"

"I believe so, but could you check and make sure? Oh, and take these documents with you."

"Yes, my lady."

I let out a deep sigh after Tanya left the room. I was still in a state of shock at these new revelations. But more than that, I felt happy. Despite my best attempts to suppress it, a smile crept up on my face.

My father had been angry *on my behalf*. At the time, I wouldn't have been surprised if he had abandoned me after all I had done to sully the family name. One of the foremost reasons I'd worked so hard after he appointed me acting governor was so that I wouldn't disappoint him any further.

Now, of course, a different motivation drove me.

I was twisted. Someone else had suffered defeat, and here I was, happy at the reason for their suffering. But it was times like this that made me love my family so much, and that made me feel loved in return.

Just then, I heard a *clink* from the pocket watch that hung around my neck, almost as if to chide me for the silly grin on my face. At the same time, my morbid happiness and excitement at the situation waned. I decided that I should try to stop thinking about the matter. I didn't pity the Kataberias, nor did I feel sorry for them, but to feel joy and excitement at their misfortune was another matter entirely.

I fingered the watch, the warm feeling inside me now coming from a different source. I wondered what he was doing. I hadn't

thanked him enough. All he ever did was save me. He helped me with my work, he gave me emotional support. I relied on him so much.

The burden of responsibility on my shoulders wasn't so bad because it was tied to a bright future for our citizens, but sometimes, when I felt that burden was too heavy, he was always the one who helped me to my feet. That's why I wanted to be the best person I could be, unashamed—for him. Even though, and perhaps especially because, we could never be a couple.

I took out the documents detailing the plans we'd been writing. Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Dean entered.

"It's nice to see you again, my lady."

"D-D-Dean!"

"Yes, that's my name. What's the matter? You look shocked to see me. Have I come at a bad time?" His face darkened.

"No, not at all. A-anyway, go ahead and have a seat. There's something I need to ask you. Ah, tea...!" I certainly couldn't say that I'd just been thinking about him, so I hastily urged him to sit down. Unfortunately, I was so nervous, I could barely speak. So many things had been going on when I realized my feelings for him; I'd never really had a chance to sit with them since.

"Don't worry about that. I ran into Tanya on the way here, and she said she'd bring us some tea. Are you *certain* nothing's happened, my lady?"

"Yes, it's fine... I was just thinking, that's all..." I answered vaguely, unsure of how to respond.

The air was so awkward that I hoped Tanya would come back soon. Thankfully, she entered the room a few moments later. I began feeling calmer after sipping some of her herbal tea.

"Thank you so much for coming," I said at last. "As I said, I was thinking. I was surprised because you showed up the moment I thought that I needed to ask your advice about something. Forgive me for being so flustered. Also, I feel like I didn't thank you adequately enough before." I tried to speak calmly, pushing my feelings for Dean deep down inside. If I closed off my heart, surely I would be able to converse with him like I had before. I *had* to. Because if anyone picked up on my feelings for him, I wouldn't be able to share these moments with him

any longer. Thus, because I loved him, I chose to close my heart.

“There’s no need to thank me,” he said. “I did it because I wished to. In any case, I’m sorry for showing up unannounced. I was nearby for an unrelated matter and wanted to know how things were going, especially with regard to tying up the loose ends from the incident before. I should have sent word that I was coming.”

“Not at all. I’m incredibly glad you came, so don’t worry about it. At any rate, here’s the thing I wanted to run by you.”

I started telling him about my idea. It was a system of medical insurance. I’d spoken with him about this before and jotted down my ideas, gradually filling in more details. That was the content of the documents I held at that moment.

Some historians posit that the first insurance system originated as a traditional mutual aid enterprise in a European guild during the Middle Ages. If an individual was injured and couldn’t work, their income would dry up and thereby deal a blow to their family budget. That obviously put a lot of pressure on workers. The best course of action was to try to prevent accidents from occurring as much as possible, but if support systems were put in place in case of unfortunate events, workers would be able to perform their jobs with more confidence.

Hopefully, that would also encourage a sense of loyalty and belonging in Armelia’s people. I was hoping that we could implement such an insurance system not only for construction workers but for all Armelian citizens.

“Ah, the idea you mentioned before. It’s important that you start it now?”

“Yes. When I told you about it before, it was something I was hoping to implement sometime in the future, and I put it on the back burner. But all the other reforms we’ve undertaken have been making great progress. Additionally, a situation has arisen that makes the insurance system necessary. Of course, the duchy will supply subsidies. Recently, thanks to *someone* cutting the fat out of our budget, we should have plenty of money to allocate toward this cause. But it will be funded mostly by mutual aid from the citizens, in the spirit of helping their fellows.”

“Interesting,” Dean said with a sparkle in his eye and a grin on his

face. He looked triumphant, like he'd just won a debate. "But at the same time, it'll be difficult. If we collect money from the citizens, we have to make sure we do so fairly. Let's gather more details before we bring it to the officials. First, we should decide how much to collect from individual payees."

"We discussed that a little before too. I still think the insurance fees that each citizen pays should be income-based."

"I don't disagree. Now that we've finished straightening out the family registers, we aren't collecting poll taxes anymore. Since we can determine any given individual's income, we can use that information to set insurance fees," Dean said.

"We just need to figure out how much of the medical treatment and medicine we can cover..."

"Perhaps we can gather those with knowledge on the subject to discuss it together? Luckily, Armelia has no shortage of such people."

"That's a good idea!" I nodded. "I'll ask Headmaster Luka for some candidates. Moreover, medical treatments and medicines are advancing day by day, so it would be a good idea to touch base with him regularly anyway."

"Indeed. It might be a good idea to cover basic medical treatments with insurance and to have more expensive treatments or check-ups paid out of pocket. If we pay for everything, the reserves won't last very long."

"Right. Up until now, each hospital has set their own price for each treatment, but we'll need to adopt a universal pricing system for insurance purposes."

"We should talk to Headmaster Luka about that too," Dean agreed.

I was starting to get more excited as our discussion continued. "We need to clarify the means of payment to doctors as well. We should feel out trying to start a guild, like we discussed before."

Suddenly, Tanya's calm voice interrupted our enthusiastic conversation. "My lady, it's almost time for your meeting."

"Oh, you're right..." I'd been so absorbed in chatting with Dean that I'd lost track of time.

"In that case, I'll check up on the progress resolving the matters

on my own. I'll pop in to Borsa and see how much of the budget that we shaved away last time can be spared for the insurance, then go to Agio and check on the progress with the family registers," Dean offered.

"That will help so much. I'll check in with Headmaster Luka. I know we're not ready to go full steam ahead yet, but we can at least get the ball rolling."

After that, I switched mental gears and walked with Tanya to my next meeting.

"You looked happy, my lady," she commented, catching me off guard.

"H-huh? I'm not sure what you mean, Tanya. I-I..." I'd finally regained my composure, and now I was all flustered again.

"I simply meant that you looked happy coming up with ways to improve conditions for the citizens and the government, my lady."

O-oh, that. I let out an inward sigh of relief. "Yes, well... I love Armelia."

So much had happened, but every time I overcame obstacles, I felt proud of the blood that ran through my veins, and I thought about how much I loved my homeland. That was why I was so happy, even if I had to suppress my feelings. In the end, I loved this place and its citizens, who had accepted me after I lost everything.

"We were able to make so much progress today," I murmured as I looked down at the documents in my hand.

After finishing my meeting and my daily duties, Dean and I had been working on the insurance policy plans. It was the middle of the night. I looked out the window, thinking that we were in all likelihood the only house in the duchy with its lights still on.

"We did. Now we just need to get it approved by the officials and the merchant guild and lay the groundwork with the various businesses and doctors."

"Oh, about that, Dean, it occurred to me that we need to lay the groundwork with the citizens as well."

“The citizens?”

“Yes. We haven’t sufficiently explained to them why the flood mitigation construction projects are necessary. I thought perhaps that this would be a good opportunity to do so, but I think it’s a better idea to explain not only why we need it but specifics about just how the mitigation practices work. I’m sure there will be some skeptics, but it’ll be better to offer the explanations than to not explain it at all.”

“I see. That sounds just like you, my lady,” Dean said with a smile on his face.

For a split second, my heart surged. How had I ever maintained my composure in front of him before?

“Does it?” I pushed those feelings aside and focused on our conversation.

“I realize you’re technically the acting governor, but you are truly a governor. You can do anything you want as long as you issue an order, but you truly love Armelia and its people.” Briefly, I thought I saw his expression darken. “Pardon me. At any rate, we should let everyone know. I think it would be best to put out something in writing rather than to express it verbally; it isn’t realistically feasible to gather everyone who needs to know and tell them in person. Furthermore, if we send verbal messages, it’s easy for the information to get misinterpreted or twisted along the way. Luckily, since we have the academy, literacy rates in the duchy are high. As long as a household includes a school-aged child, they’ll be able to read the announcement.”

“Good point. Let’s distribute literature regarding the policy to all households throughout the domain. Perhaps in magazine form?”

“Excellent idea. In the capital, the upper class reads magazines for pleasure, but it might be possible to establish one in Armelia as a means to distribute information to the citizens. Actually, I’m sure it’ll be possible at some point, given how swiftly education is progressing here.”

“Indeed. How wonderful that will be when we do it!”

“The reason it’s so wonderful is because of *your* wonderful relationship with the citizens. The vast majority of nobles fear empowering the common person.” Dean’s voice became so serious that it frightened me, a sharp contrast to my excitement.

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Remember what you said before? Knowledge is power. That’s precisely correct. In this kingdom, knowledge grants a certain set of special rights and privileges. People who possess knowledge can suppress and control the citizens. In other words, you’re on your way to dismantling a cornerstone of the kingdom’s class system.”

“Goodness! Ha ha ha.”

I laughed, but Dean gave me a questioning look, as if trying to ascertain the meaning of my mirth. I didn’t respond right away. Instead, I went out onto the open balcony. It was pitch-black, and I couldn’t see a thing. But if I closed my eyes, I could picture the town perfectly.

“It’s true that it may be easier to suppress the uneducated,” I acknowledge. “I could technically do anything I wanted, and they wouldn’t understand. But that’s what I would *have* to do to suppress them, so I don’t mind getting rid of a burdensome system like that. If I make a grave mistake, then Berne will succeed me. And if Berne’s children or grandchildren make a grave mistake, then I want the citizens to be able to choose how to move forward. They have a right to do that, as citizens of Armelia.” I wondered if I thought this because of my past life. Either way, I took that knowledge, and Dean’s advice, and kept charging ahead. Although I’m sure some people in this world viewed my position as heresy.

“The future that frightens me most is one where the citizens move against me *because* they don’t understand something, because they assume I’ve done the wrong thing,” I said. “Lack of comprehension leads to anxiety, which in turn leads to dissatisfaction. With no outlet for those feelings, they can easily lead to violence. But if the people have the knowledge to make their own judgments, then making decisions reflecting those opinions leads to a well-ordered government. That’s the ideal situation.”

I turned toward Dean and saw that his eyes were wide with surprise. “Moreover, it’s impossible to fully suppress inquisitive minds,” I said firmly. “That’s what I think, anyway. Knowledge is power? No, because people are creatures who *think*, everyone has power. That’s why, eventually, the power will pass to the citizenry, regardless of anything I did or didn’t do.”

Dean laughed, the sound of it reverberating in the darkness. Now it was my turn to be surprised; it was so rare to hear him laugh out loud

like that. "I suppose you're right. The power will eventually pass to the citizens, you say?"

"I'm only speculating."

"No, I have a feeling that you're right. So if you think about it, that makes the battle for succession in the royal family seem even more absurd than it already does. It will be up to the future king whether the citizens, armed with their new power, despise the royal family and abolish it, or if they will remain admired and respected by the people. That's not a matter of *who* becomes king, but more so *what* that king does. The people will decide whether his actions are just or unjust. I've never even thought about it before. How very narrow-minded of me."

"Dean...you're being too hard on yourself," I said.

But for some reason, he looked happy—no, perhaps *freed* was the right way to describe it. "Forgive me, my lady, but can we keep what I said between just the two of us?"

"Ha ha ha. As long as you keep my words a secret as well. We'll be equally guilty, then."

He looked so very amused that I couldn't help but join in and smile too.

"Yes, of course," he said.

"Ha ha ha. Well, then. As my accomplice, would you like to join me for a drink? Think of it as your reward for keeping mum."

"I feel like I should be the one rewarding you, but I'd love to."

I went back inside and pulled a bottle of wine from the shelf. It was one my grandfather had given me. He liked to send me wine every now and then, along with the instructions to relax with a drink, but since I never really drank that much, the bottles just kept piling up.

Tanya always demurred, and even though Dida enthusiastically offered to drink them, Lyle and Tanya had banded together to stop him. The only ones who *would* join me for a drink were Merida and Moneda.

We took a seat on the balcony and poured a glass for one another.

"Going back to our conversation..." It sounded like Dean was choosing his words carefully. "What do you think about the notion of 'ignorance is bliss'?"

"Are you asking because of a personal experience?"

“I’m not sure. But people aren’t strong enough to accept every bit of information they receive. Let’s take the flood mitigation, for example. Suppose we go to the people who live in those areas and we say, ‘Your land flooded one hundred fifty and one hundred years ago!’ and they become anxious and fall into a panic?”

“That is a concern.” I smiled wryly at this example. This result certainly wasn’t out of the question. “Ignorance is bliss, hm? I feel like only those who *aren’t* ignorant can say that. I could manipulate the information in my favor, but if I did that, then it might cause doubts in the future, which would be completely counterintuitive. I’m not saying I always have to act with complete transparency in every situation, but I want to be as honest with my people as possible.”

“I see...”

“So really, only the people in the know can look at others and say, ‘Ignorance is bliss.’”

No one can ever completely understand what someone else is feeling. And you can’t ever predict how someone will take information, or what they’ll think about it either. And so...no one can quite be sure that ignorance is bliss. After all, sometimes information you’re not privy to can bear fruit in unpredictable ways.

“I’m not sure what you’re hiding,” I went on, “but if you’re doing it to protect others, then that’s based on your speculation about how they’ll react to the truth. They could hold a grudge once they find out. They might even hold a grudge now, because they’re aware they don’t know the truth. It all depends on what it is. It also depends on how close of a relationship you have with those you’re concealing the truth from.”

“Why do you think I’m hiding something?”

“Aren’t you? I feel like you’re not talking about this in regard to me and the Armelian citizens. Although, I have no idea what you’re hiding or who you’re hiding it from.”

“I’m hiding something from many people. Including you.”

“Goodness. What is it?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret anymore.”

I laughed. “That’s true. And what does it say about me, who continues to employ you despite this secretive behavior? Ah, we’ve had

this discussion before, haven't we?"

The wine was delicious, which wasn't a surprise, since my grandfather had such wonderful taste in alcohol, being the heavy drinker he was. That thought reminded me of my previous life and how I had been in the habit of sitting at home after a hard day's work and drinking by myself.

"I have one or two secrets of my own," I said. "Everyone does. As long as it's not something that could harm the people of Armelia, I won't fault you for it."

"My lady, you..." Dean's tone was exasperated, but the smile on his face was incredibly tender.

To be honest, I was dying to know what he was hiding. But at the same time, I was frightened. I had plenty of grounds to be suspicious, especially considering the current state of affairs. But I'd spent so much time with him that I was naturally given to believe I could trust him. So it didn't matter whether I was better off not knowing or if I'd regret the truth. Not as long as he had been honest with me about the path we'd taken together and that we were headed in the same direction.

A gust of wind blew past, carrying flower petals with it. A beautiful sight, befitting this duchy where spring eternally lingered. The flowers were a beautiful pale pink that reminded me of cherry blossoms. They filled my vision, almost like a veil of mist had fallen over my eyes. Even though Dean was right in front of me, I couldn't make out his face. I wondered what expression he had on right now. The flowers obscured everything.

Suddenly, he reached a hand toward me. I silently stared at it. His hand stopped for a split second, so close to my cheek that if I moved ever so slightly, he might have brushed his fingertips against it. My heart swelled at that faint warmth. I caught a glimpse of his eyes between the pink petals, beautiful and serious.

Is it strange to describe a man as beautiful? I thought to myself sardonically. But that's truly what I thought of him.

Then I thought: *I love him*. I meant it so earnestly, it was frightening.

"I just wish..." Dean whispered. But he didn't continue. Maybe he hadn't meant to say it out loud to begin with.

The wind stopped. His hand followed the curve of my cheek to the back of my head. “That was quite a gale, wasn’t it? You have petals in your hair.” The serious tone in his voice had vanished, just like the wind. When he removed his hand from my hair, he was indeed holding several flower petals.

“You’re right. But...they were so beautiful,” I said, and I smiled—swallowing the rest of my words as the expression spread across my face. He smiled too, but it almost seemed self-deprecating.

That night, I had a dream. It was one I’d had many times before. In the dream, I had survived the accident in my old world and made a full recovery, upon which I returned to my normal, everyday life.

Every time I had that dream, I grew anxious and frightened, since those memories of my past life were so freshly recovered. It made me wonder if this life I was living now was reality or just a dream. I had memories of my life in this world as Iris. But ever since I was a little girl, sometimes I would be overcome by a panicked feeling that I had forgotten something, and an incredible desire to go somewhere other than where I presently was.

Honestly, I’d been relieved when I finally remembered my past life. It felt like I had at last regained something inside of me that had been missing. At the same time, when I remembered that life, the lines between reality and dreams blurred, and I became like a lost little girl who had found herself in a world far, far away, who didn’t know where she belonged.

That fear tormented me at the most unexpected times. Was the life that I was living right now actually reality? Or was I still back in Japan, exhausted from work and dreaming this all up after falling into a deep sleep? The mind is a most unpredictable thing.

My family was the main reason I’d thrown myself into my work, but I had also done so because I wanted to do something meaningful, to *feel* like all of this was real. If I immersed myself in work, I could forget those worries. It made this unpredictable situation feel more tangible.

But there was more to it now. When I told myself that, the image of the woman wearing a business suit working in a busy office vanished. In its place appeared all the many people I’d met as Iris. The ones I’d grown up with or met at school, and the people I’d met through working as the governor of Armelia. And, of course, Dean.

My relationships, memories, and feelings for all those people tied me to this world. That was why I was able to believe that I was really here. It was why I was able to tell the “me” in my dreams that everything was all right. At last, she smiled.

Two days later, Dean left in a rush in the morning. At the time, I was meeting with representatives from the merchant guild. I would’ve felt more confident had Dean come with me, but he’d said he was busy, so I couldn’t possibly have asked him to accompany me.

“We can’t ever let our guard down in a meeting with you,” one of the leaders of the guild said with a sigh.

“Unlike last time, this isn’t a request. It’s already been decided.” I said this with a smile on my face, but for some reason everyone in the room looked very tense.

“Occupational accident insurance, eh? So we pay an insurance fee, and then if something bad happens, we get a payout. And each occupation has a different fee to pay depending on corresponding risk. Honestly, where do you come up with these things?”

“This practice will be mandatory for as long as an individual works. There are advantages, of course. The insurance payout will be sufficient to cover total financial loss and necessary living expenses.”

At present, if a worker suffered an injury on the job, they had to hope that their employer would compensate them. Most of the time, they received an advance on their pay and a lump sum on top of that. I had checked multiple sources regarding the lump sum, and it seemed like it was in truth a terribly small amount, barely enough to cover a one-time medical treatment. “Lump” sum didn’t even seem like the best way to describe it—it was maybe little more than a pimple.

“This insurance will lower the risk of skilled workers leaving, and it will certainly boost morale. Your workers feel like they’re being advocated for.”

I noticed several people reacting to my last sentence.

“It sounds like you have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Oh? It isn’t like I’ve been watching you or anything. I just hear things here and there in town.”

Truthfully, it was a total coincidence that I’d found out that workers wanted more compensation when they were injured at work. It wasn’t that I was watching the merchant guild’s actions particularly closely. Tanya had discovered this information while conducting a different survey in town. She really had a knack for gathering essential information.

“Well, if it’s mandatory, then I suppose we have no choice. Although, you have prepared quite the substantial reward for us...”

“Indeed I have. Just think of these lump sums as an investment.”

“We hope to continue cultivating a long and wonderful relationship with you, Lady Iris.”

I let out an inward sigh of relief once the leaders of the guild gave their approval. Even though they said they couldn’t let down their guard with me, I actually felt the same way. I was always anxious about what they might say to me. “I’m honored to hear that.”

I exchanged firm handshakes with each of them, calling an end to the meeting.

Afterward, I headed to the academy so I could speak with Headmaster Luka.

“Are you here about that insurance system I’ve heard about?” he asked in lieu of a greeting, getting straight to the point.

“Yes. We’re introducing insurance for occupational hazards as well as medical misfortune. I’ve already met with the leaders of the merchant guild and secured their approval. This system will pay for damages incurred after an accident on the job. I’ll be discussing the particulars with them later.”

“The leaders of the merchant guild are a stingy bunch, but if you’ve already acquired their approval, then I’m sure everything will go smoothly from here on out.”

“I hope so. Anyway, I was hoping to discuss the medical insurance system with you, Headmaster.”

“Ah, yes. And what do you want this senile old fellow to do for you?”

“I’d like you to gather together some experts on the subject to determine which treatments and medications we can cover. If we cover every single expensive medical treatment, it won’t take long for the system to break down—the funds will simply dry up. That’s why I’d like to talk to you and other knowledgeable people.”

“I see...”

“Also, now that we’re introducing these systems, I’d like to establish a medical guild. We can determine which percentage of treatments will be a patient’s responsibility to cover, and insurance will pay for the rest. Doctors will send reports to the guild regarding the medical treatments each patient received, and the guild can cover any losses.”

In Japan, the insurance companies used a points system. After an examination and a diagnosis, each medical treatment was given a number of points, along with the medicine and medical supplies needed.

I’d also already discussed the medical guild with the other Armelian officials.

“From now on, we’ll charge a flat fee for run-of-the-mill medical treatments. That’s what I want to discuss with the experts.”

If we left it to the free market to determine, prices for medical treatment would skyrocket, because medicine was advancing by the day in Armelia. If things continued that way, the insurance system would quickly collapse. That’s why I needed to figure out where to draw the line across the board. I fully intended to ensure that the services that wealthy people desired—as well as expensive medical treatments—were paid for out of pocket. The insurance system itself would be administered by public management.

Individuals of all ages were covered by insurance. However, funds would be collected from all citizens *except* for children and the elderly through a flat tax and insurance fees. The payments would be doled out by public management. Anything public management couldn’t cover would likely eventually lead to a private insurance system. That had led me to another idea.

Since I was establishing an insurance system, I thought I could have Abitante and Borsa cooperate to draw up the insurance policies. But if I was going to centralize it under public management, then I

could use the documents relating to the census that was currently in progress.

Basically, the point would be to ensure that people of Armelia felt they were accorded a special privilege for their citizenry. Those from other domains would still have to pay for everything out of pocket.

“General medical treatments, hm? That will be difficult to determine. Every doctor charges a different price for their services.”

“Yes, and the more reputable the doctor, the higher the price.”

“So going by what you’ve said, we’ll want to establish fixed prices for medical examinations. Insurance will pay a portion of that depending on the diagnosis, and the patient will pay out of pocket for anything insurance doesn’t cover.”

I jotted down what Headmaster Luka said.

“Different doctors will also prescribe different treatments depending on their diagnoses,” he went on. “Furthermore, any given treatment may rely on different medicines, from which a patient may choose. Therefore, the physicians will need to be made aware of which medicines are covered by insurance. They should be able to explain this to the patient and leave it to them to decide whether to use medicines covered by insurance or to pay for those that aren’t. The medical guild also ought to sponsor several classes a year to educate the physicians on this process, along with lectures detailing all the medicines covered under the insurance plans.”

“I see.”

“Regarding the medical guild, you should also employ physicians there to ensure the process goes more smoothly and so they can conduct audits of the process.”

I stared at Headmaster Luka. I’d been so preoccupied with concentrating on what he was saying that I only now realized that he was talking like he was already completely on board with the idea.

He noticed the surprised look in my eyes, and he gave me a wry grin. “Things are never boring with you around, that’s for certain. I’m no spring chicken, but for this project, you have my utmost devotion.”

The conversation had gone much smoother than I’d anticipated, much to my relief. He agreed to gather some authorities on the subject, whom I would be able to meet with at a later date.

With that taken care of, I returned to the mansion and got back to work. I didn't have much choice, since I was actively making more work for myself. The government officials of Armelia were also bearing the brunt of the increased workload. Those working at Abitante and Borsa were especially busy, although the latter seemed to have a gleam in their eye because of it. Or perhaps "gleam" is too soft a word to describe the look they had. Glint was more like it. Honestly, it was a bit frightening.

I went to take a peek after adding more documents to their pile, and they were grinning like fools while working at breakneck speed, with some shouting "This is nothing!" Of course, I simply pretended like I never saw a thing and quietly took my leave. The officials at Borsa really were workaholics in the best sense of the word. After I shared that opinion with Tanya, she immediately replied, "You're just like them, my lady."

"Excuse me." I heard a knock at the door and Sebastian entered. "May I have a moment, my lady?"

"What is it, Sebastian?"

"You've received a pile of invitations, my lady."

"Ah, now that you mention it, it's almost time for the social season, isn't it? I can't believe it's already that time of year..." It had completely slipped my mind. I had been so absorbed in my work that I completely forgot about being social at all. That was quite unheard of for the daughter of a noble. "Social...yes, social."

"Is something the matter?"

"I just can't believe people want to throw a party in times like these."

The king was ill and the fight between the first and second prince's factions was worsening. Wouldn't it be a better idea to quietly withdraw to one's domain and hole up there for a while? *I'm not saying it's bad to want to have it both ways, but still...*

"It's quite the opposite, my lady," Sebastian grinned, and it was quite an intimidating expression. "It's precisely *because* of times like these that the families want to gather together—to gauge the situation."

"Can't Mother just make the rounds to the important households?"

"Surely you jest, my lady. You've officially made your debut into

high society; if you don't attend now, not only will you damage your own reputation, but the good name of House Armelia as well. Moreover, it's for your benefit to go, since things have been so fishy in the capital of late. It will help keep you on top of things, the better to ensure you don't find yourself trapped later."

"I understand. I had to give it a good try, anyway." I knew the importance of keeping up appearances. Mother always called high society a battlefield—it was a place where nobles both sounded each other out and kept each other in check. As the ruler of my domain, it was necessary for me to both keep myself apprised of other families' actions and demonstrate Armelia's power to them.

But I will admit to wondering if maybe, just *maybe* there might be a way around actually attending.

"At any rate, I've cleared your schedule for the day after tomorrow. You have an appointment with Madam Crejours to take your measurements and design your dress."

"Oh, that's right. I used to go to the madam's place so often. I've heard rumors that she's quite busy lately, though."

Quite some time had passed since we discovered silk, but we were finally working on selling it. The country of origin had concealed the methods of silk production, but I knew the raw materials they used due to my past life. I had taken an interest in stories and anecdotes regarding the Silk Road in a history class I took.

You never know what might come in handy in the future.

After a lot of trial and error, we had established a means of production. We'd secured a limited number of resources and tried to place restrictions on exporting silkworms, but fortunately, from the standpoint of a country who didn't know what silk was made from, the worms were nothing but bugs. Therefore, it had been easy to buy the silkworms from a separate country and begin to breed them. Now that we had a fair amount, we had been able to start the silk production. However, we didn't yet have sufficient raw materials to begin full-scale production, so we were only selling silk garments at our flagship store in Armelia.

The madam also had a supply of silk, and once word got around that she was able to make her customers a dress on the cutting edge of the latest fashion, she'd been swamped with work.

“She’s busy because of all the ideas and fabrics you keep bringing her for your new dresses. She says she wants to prioritize your needs first, especially as she’s been having trouble coming up with new ideas lately.”

“O-oh.”

As promised, Madam Crejours arrived two days later to take my measurements. I wasn’t well versed in clothing and accessories, so after I’d placed a few orders for myself, Tanya stepped in and adamantly declared that I must have the very finest of clothes, at which point she descended into an enthusiastic discussion with the madam.

They discussed colors, patterns of embroidery, embellishments, and so on. I did love fancy things, but after they spent more than half a day discussing every possible detail of the dresses with no end in sight, all I could do was stare blankly at them. At that point, I didn’t even care what I ended up with.

The madam came off as a wonderfully businesslike and refined woman, but once she got to talking about clothes, her entire demeanor changed. Her enthusiasm was further stoked by Tanya, so it was even more overwhelming than usual.

Since production took a while, I was a bit worried that the dress wouldn’t be ready in time, but the madam said she would put her entire staff on the project to ensure that it would be. I was sure Sebastian had arranged for everything to go off without a hitch.

I was used to my shoulders being stiff from sitting at my desk and working for so long, but now they ached for a different reason. Nevertheless, I headed back to work.

“That’s all the news I have for you today. It’s not an exaggeration to say that Armelia’s economy is thriving,” Moneda said, in high spirits. He gave me regular reports on the economic situation of the bank in the duchy’s capital as well as its branches in other cities. We also discussed future plans. He was right; things were going swimmingly for Armelia’s economy.

The flood mitigation project was proceeding smoothly, as were

other infrastructure improvements. At the same time, Armelia's population was ever-increasing, resulting in a brisk trade with other kingdoms. Now that both domestic and foreign demand had grown, our employment numbers were very favorable, which had led us to a bullish market.

"Yes, that's true. But Moneda, there's something that's been on my mind."

"What's that, my lady?"

"The cost of living in the capital is skyrocketing. Especially the price of food."

"Oh, you've heard about that?"

"I make it my business to know all the details about the situation in the capital, no matter how small," I said. "As of right now, it hasn't affected Armelia, but what are your thoughts on the matter?"

Moneda nodded. "Well, I was also concerned, so I looked into the matter. But I haven't heard of any regions suffering from poor harvests, nor have I found any evidence of companies buying up and hoarding goods. The situation is truly baffling."

"I had a feeling. Even Tanya said it would take her a while to look into it."

"I was merely using my past experiences to my advantage. Although I quit the merchant guild, I still check in with them—and companies in other kingdoms as well—because I still have quite a bit of influence in that arena."

"I see. So there's a shortage of goods despite no word of bad harvests. And it was gradual, so the citizens haven't grown restless."

"It's possible that the regions producing food are holding on to product instead of releasing it. Or the palace might be placing a levy on the goods. But that's about all I can think of."

"Or Tweil is involved."

"Pardon?"

I'd spoken so quietly, he hadn't heard what I said. "Nothing. We have plenty of supplies stockpiled in reserve, correct?"

"Yes, we bought up goods to stockpile then when other domains were raising tariffs on Armelia."

“Right...”

I couldn't help but feel that we were playing right into the enemy's hands. It was entirely possible that I was just being paranoid. At any rate, it was fortuitous indeed that we had plenty of goods at hand.

“It's hard for me to believe that farms are withholding their goods. Keep an eye on what's going on in those various cities of yours, Moneda.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“By the way, I've noticed that promissory notes and checks are being much more widely used. I'm sure it's because the banks have been encouraging their usage. Thank you for that, Moneda.”

“I'm honored to hear that. It's all due to your support, my lady. The special ink we received has provided the bank with the means to produce them at no cost to us. It's therefore allowed us to build up our own supply.”

The Azuta Corporation's research and development department had given the bank our recipe for our special ink. I couldn't remember what they had been trying to make at the time, but the ink they developed changed color when you shined a light on it.

Recently, we'd invested in a great number of inventors and researchers, leading to a landslide of new products and technology. The researchers' opinion by and large was that most of their innovations would be used as nothing more than toys if sold to the general public, and since they felt like that would be a waste of their efforts, I had decided to buy them up for Armelia. In this case, I had given the ink to the bank, which they were using to make checks and promissory notes that were difficult to forge. It was employed for other anti-counterfeit purposes too.

“There's no other use for it, so this just happened to be the right product for the right place.”

“That reminds me, I brought you the thing we discussed before.”

“I was wondering why you brought up the ink all of a sudden. I haven't even approved this one, correct? Let me see it.” I took the object from him and looked at it. “It's very well constructed. Knowing you, you're probably also using this to combat counterfeiting, aren't

you?”

“These documents will answer your questions.”

“Goodness, you certainly are prepared,” I said with a laugh.

“If you intend to attack the enemy’s castle, the first step is to fill in the moat. We can get this up and running at any time.”

“I see. You were a merchant, after all, so I shouldn’t be surprised. Let me think about it for a bit more.”

Just then, Sebastian entered the room. “M-my lady...” He looked unusually flustered, making my stomach tie itself in knots.

“What is it, Sebastian?”

“An emissary has arrived from Acacia, a neighboring kingdom. Apparently, the first prince has ordered them to observe the goings-on in Armelia.”

“What did you say?” For a moment, I felt just as flustered as Sebastian looked. Moneda’s eyes also widened with surprise.

It made more of an impact than I’d expected. The kingdom of Acacia lay across the sea from Armelia, and because of that location, it had treated Armelia like the gateway to Tasmeria for many generations through its diplomacy. Not only did they speak a different language, but their culture was vastly different from ours. Every few years, Acacia sent an envoy to the palace to pay their respects, but that was to the royal family. It was absolutely unheard of for another kingdom to single out a certain domain for their visit.

Was it because our trade had been so brisk lately?

“W-well, I’ll meet with the envoy. Moneda, would you mind...”

He bowed his head and excused himself before I could even finish my sentence.

“Will you see the prince?”

“I can’t. It would leave a terrible impression if I were to depart from protocol and bypass Tasmeria’s royal family to meet with him myself. I’ve already put Armelia in an awkward position, even within the kingdom. Worst-case scenario, I wouldn’t be surprised if people think we’re trying to break away and become independent.”

“So...you wish to decline?”

"I think that's for the best. It's better to cause as little offense as possible. At the very least, I'd prefer if they visited the palace and *then* stopped by here..."

"That's true..." Sebastian was looking awfully pale. I couldn't blame him; I was sure I looked no different.

"Sebastian. Have you informed my father?"

"I've already sent our fastest horse."

"Of course you did. Well, there's no reason for me to keep them waiting, so I'll go ahead."

"Very well."

The long hallway felt even longer than usual. I didn't want to go, but I had to. My sense of duty was the only thing making me drag my heavy legs forward.

"I'm terribly sorry to have made you wait," I apologized as I began the meeting. A man around my age was waiting for me in the parlor. He had a scarf wrapped around his head and wore loose-fitting clothes—the traditional garb of Acacia. As soon as he spotted me, a soft smile spread across his face.

"And I am terribly sorry for my unannounced visit. My name is Hafiz Bent Mersid."

Whenever an envoy from Acacia had visited the palace, the royal family had always thrown a party to welcome them. Since I was the daughter of a duke, I'd attended them before I was expelled from the academy, but I didn't recognize this man. Of course, I'd only ever seen the main ambassador, so I could only speak about that fellow in particular.

"I'm honored to make your acquaintance. My name is Iris. Iris Lana Armelia. It's a pleasure."

"I have to admit, I was surprised to hear that a woman was in charge of this domain all by herself... But I also heard that Armelia is a most prosperous region. Your father had quite keen insight if he decided to entrust Armelia to you."

"Goodness... I'm not sure I deserve those compliments."

"Don't be humble. Trade has increased by leaps and bounds since you became governor. My kingdom's royal family is extremely

impressed with your abilities. That's one of the reasons why our first prince, His Royal Highness Prince Khadir, decided to visit."

"I see..." I hid my mouth with my fan as I laughed.

My mind raced as I tried to figure out what to do so as not to be rude to the man in front of me. He was handsome, though simultaneously, he gave off a wild, passionate impression. He had a soft smile on his face, but the glint in his eyes seemed to say that he was very carefully sizing me up.

"I'm extremely honored, but I will have to ask my father's opinion first..." I said.

"Do you? I heard you were endowed with all the authority of a true governor."

You certainly have done a lot of research about this one domain of another kingdom! I thought as I let out an inward sigh, careful not to let my smile falter.

"But by all means, do so. However, if you speak with your father, I do have one favor to ask of you," Hafiz said.

"Oh? What's that?"

"To be honest with you, our visit to observe Armelia is merely a pretext. The real reason Prince Khadir has come is to propose to you."

This time, I was so surprised that I thought my heart would stop. I knew what the phrase "propose" meant in this context, but it didn't even register with me.

"It seems His Highness fell in love with you at first sight. It's moreover quite a favorable proposal, one that will build a bridge between our two countries."

I had no memory of the first prince being among the envoys at the prior parties. Was he lying when he said he'd fallen in love with me at first sight? Or had he disguised himself to blend in with his diplomats?

"Here is the formal offer." Hafiz reached into his pocket and produced a folded piece of parchment. As he did so, the gold ring on his finger caught my attention. The top of it was flat, embossed with a design of a falcon. He handed the document to Sebastian, who then passed it to me.

"Thank you, Hafiz. Goodness, that's a very beautiful ring you're

wearing.”

“Ah, this? It’s made from gold mined in my country.”

“Is it? The design is so gorgeous, it caught my eye.”

Hafiz’s smile deepened when he heard that. We stared at each other silently for a few moments. I knew we were both sizing each other up to glean as much information as possible and studying each other’s dispositions. The silent siege and defense filled the room with great tension.



“Excuse me.” Tanya swept into the middle of our discussion.

“What is it?” I asked.

Instead of answering me aloud, she leaned forward and whispered in my ear. “I’ve just received word that your father has been attacked.”

I wanted to scream “What?!” but I somehow managed to suppress it when I remembered the man before me. “I’m so sorry Hafiz, but there’s been an emergency. Would you mind if I excused myself?”

“Not at all. Please go ahead.”

I rushed out of the room as fast as I could without looking impolite. Tanya and I walked down the hallway and entered a room two doors down from the parlor. “What do you mean, Father’s been attacked? Is he all right?!”

“Yes. He was heavily wounded, but it doesn’t seem fatal.”

“Thank goodness.” I was so relieved, it felt like my entire body went limp.

“My lady!” Tanya quickly reached out to support me, else I would have collapsed on the spot. “Are you all right?”

“Y-yes...” I tried to take deep, calming breaths to compose myself. I’d felt so dizzy that I thought I would pass out, but I was slowly returning back to normal. “I’m fine. I can go back in now.”

“But...”

“We can’t let him stay any longer than necessary.” I wobbled a bit, then righted myself and began to walk. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“It’s fine... You look unwell. Are you quite all right?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, I just received word that my father has fallen ill.”

“Oh dear...”

“Luckily, it’s nothing serious. But he is my father after all, so I’m incredibly worried. I shall be leaving the capital with all haste to attend to him. I’m so sorry to leave during your visit, but...”

“Please don’t worry. Your father’s health is more important. I’m sure being far from him only makes you worry all the more.”

“Thank you for being so understanding. When next you come, it will be my pleasure to welcome you to Armelia with open arms.”

And so our meeting came to an abrupt, unexpected end.

"I'm going to the capital right away," I told Sebastian as soon as Hafiz left.

He and Tanya both gave me concerned looks, no doubt due to the fact that I'd almost collapsed once again after our Acacian friend left. I currently lay reclined on a chaise lounge resting. I could tell both of them were wondering if I was even up to making the journey, so I gave them a wry smile.

"Don't worry. I'll feel better once I rest. He's quite cunning, isn't he? I certainly never expected Prince Khadir to pose as an envoy to visit me personally."

"What?!"

"Huh?!"

Sebastian and Tanya both balked when they heard my comments. I could hardly blame them; after all, unbeknownst to them, they'd just been in the presence of a foreign prince.

"A-are you certain about that?"

"Fairly, yes. He was wearing a ring with a falcon crest on it, wasn't he?"

"Y-yes..." Sebastian agreed. He was the one who had seen the documents from "Hafiz."

"In Acacia, each member of the royal family is endowed with a unique family crest, and it's their tradition to wear the mark somewhere."

"You know the prince's crest, my lady?"

"No. But I do know that falcons are regarded as sacred in Acacia, so it wouldn't surprise me if one were used for the prince's crest." I'd acquired this knowledge from documents Rehme had gathered for me from both records kept by former governors of Armelia and information she'd received because of the recent increase in trade between our two kingdoms. "Besides, remember what he said? The prince had come to propose to me—not that he *was* going to come. And he had all the proper documents in order."

"Forgive me for being presumptuous, my lady, but...don't tell me you're going to accept?" Tanya asked, looking terribly concerned.

I smiled ruefully at her. At first, I'd simply been shocked by his proposal. But now that some time had passed, in the back of my mind, I was calculating the possible advantages of this union. We were separated by the sea, but the kingdom of Acacia was large, about the same size as Tasmeria. And it would be of great benefit to me if Armelia served as a bridge to their kingdom—both for Tasmeria, my family, and Armelia.

It was much more in line with my personality to choose a marriage that was chock full of benefits rather than to wallow in a love that could never come to fruition. One day, the pain I held in my heart would be nothing more than a memory, which I would be able to dismiss with a laugh.

"However, I can't say anything else on the matter until I consult with Father," I said.

I'd already reached a decision in my mind, but my heart wasn't going to be as easy to convince. It kept telling me to give it a little longer. Just a little bit longer.

Don't extinguish these feelings that have just begun to bloom! it cried.

"How did it go, Prince Khadir?" the kindly old man asked a younger one, who smiled. This smile was completely different from the one he had shown at the Armelia estate; there wasn't a hint of kindness in it. It exuded a certain ferocity.

"I did what I set out to do," he said as he took a seat on the ornate sofa. It was lower than the ones in Armelia, and much softer too, so his body sank down into the cushions.

"Is that right? Your old grandpa was so worried, it must've taken a few years off my life! Do me a favor and don't tease me for a while."

"I won't. I'd be in trouble without you, Gramps." The man—Khadir—laughed heartily.

"Still, you certainly got back early. Are you sure no one recognized you...?"

"No, the girl knew I was the prince the moment I introduced

myself.”

“What?! She recognized you, yet she sent you home without making you welcome first?”

“She received word that her father had collapsed, so she had no choice. She said she would welcome me with open arms ‘next time.’ She also implied that it was better that I didn’t reveal my identity. She’s quite interesting.” Khadir chuckled, clearly in high spirits.

“She sounds pretty gutsy, eh?”

Khadir picked a piece of fruit from the plate next to him. They were on a ship now, and it had already embarked. Occasionally, they felt the gentle sea breeze blowing in through the window. “Fascinating, right? Gramps...I really want her now,” he said cheerfully as he licked the fruit juice that dripped down his hand.

“Well, then, did you give her the papers?”

“Yes. But whether I welcome her as my wife or my mistress depends on what position she’s in when I return. At any rate, I’m amazed by her ability to govern. I’m sure she’d much rather display her power than be a noble from a ruined country.”

“Is the king serious, then?”

“I talked him into it. My father’s greed is causing quite a bit of trouble. For him to give himself over to every single desire he has at this age is just incorrigible,” Khadir said, not looking troubled in the slightest. In fact, he wore an amused smile. “I’ve heard there are some tough guys in Armelia, but I’m interested to see just how much they’re capable of, what with their troubles at home and abroad.”

“Well, I’m rooting for them, if only because they’re a great trading partner.”

“Hey now, Gramps. Make sure no one else sees you rooting for an enemy kingdom.”

“I know very well who to show my cards to. You don’t care whether they win or lose. Isn’t that right, Prince?”

Khadir’s only response to the old man was a smile.

The boat carrying the two of them kept on course, its sails billowing in the wind.

Chapter 19: The Duke's Daughter Sets off Sparks

AFTER THE UNOFFICIAL VISIT from Acacia's prince, I headed for the capital just as I said I would. I had to rearrange my plans, but I'd fortunately already seen to the most important ones. Most of all, I'd left the household in very capable hands. The bureaucrats and merchants stepped up to the plate without complaint.

Only Madam Crejours was upset. Obviously, the dress I ordered wouldn't be ready in time, so she'd have to send it along later. I'd had Tanya tell her I had to leave sooner than expected, and she came all the way to the estate to cling to my arm, tearfully swearing that she would ensure the dress reached me and urging me to please wear it. So much had happened since I ordered it, I'd almost forgotten I'd done so at all, so it really wasn't a big deal to me. But once the madam clamped onto my arm, she showed no signs of letting go, so much so that even Tanya wasn't sure how to respond to her emotionality.

We proceeded to the capital with utmost haste, going to the mansion as soon as we arrived.

"Father!" The servants brought me to his bedroom.

"Iris..." My father looked surprised to see me show up so suddenly. "Ah!" He started to sit up, but then he grimaced with pain.

"Please lie back down, darling!" My mother was sitting in a chair next to him and quickly rushed over to support his back, then eased him down onto the bed.

"How are you, Father?"

"It's nothing major. Everyone's making a fuss over nothing."

"I'd hardly call a wound that nearly penetrated your organs a fuss over nothing!" My mother spoke in a voice so fierce that it echoed throughout the room.

Of course I was shocked by the severity of my father's wounds, but to be honest, my mother's intensity shocked me even more.

"I thought my heart was going to stop. By the time I finally arrived, you'd already lost so much blood, and you were struggling to

breathe. And yet the second you sat up, you said you were going to work! I beg of you, please just take care of yourself more.”

“Merry, I hate worrying you. But I have to go. House Marea is using Queen Ellia to interfere with government affairs. I must serve as the palace bureaucrats’ shield and protect them before the government comes to a standstill.”

“They’re being held back at a critical moment; not only are you their shield, you are their hope. If they lose you, then they will lose hope forever. And I wouldn’t be able to live if I lost you like this either...”

“Merry...”

“Darling...”

Although I was truly grateful that my parents were so close, I suddenly felt extremely out of the place in this tender scene.

“Um, Mother...” I didn’t want to interrupt, but the conversation had come to a lull. “How are Father’s wounds?” I knew if I asked him, he’d just tell me he was fine, so I turned to my mother for the most honest response.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Iris. Your father must remain on absolute bed rest for a while. His wounds haven’t fully closed, so if he pushes himself and they open, it could be quite dangerous.”

“I see...”

“You must’ve been so worried, you dropped everything and rushed here. Thank you.”

Hearing my father express his gratitude warmed my heart. I wanted to respond, but a hot lump blocked my throat and tears began to well in my eyes. It was all I could do to shake my head.

There was something I wanted to ask him. Something that had been on my mind the entire journey here. But I was too afraid to speak...

Yet just as I had the thought, he spoke:

“Iris, there’s no reason for you to be upset. This isn’t your fault.”

My father guessed what was on my mind before I could even articulate the words.

“But Father, remember what you said before? You told me to be

careful of House Marea. Are you certain it's not my fault that you were targeted?"

"We don't know who was behind the attack."

"And that's my fault," said my mother. "I ordered the deaths of everyone involved, and the only ones left were their minions, who were unable to give us any valuable information at all." My mother reported this apologetically.

My father smiled gently. "If you hadn't saved me, I'd be dead by now. And because I'm so grateful to you, I have no intention of finding fault with your actions. I just wanted to tell Iris that since we don't know who is responsible, she shouldn't blame herself."

"But..."

"Even if we find out House Marea was to blame, it still won't be your fault. I'm doing everything I can at the palace so that you can continue governing. To that end, I've personally challenged House Marea many times. There's no reason for you to feel any sort of responsibility for this."

"Father..."

"More importantly, Iris, I've heard you've had quite a rough time yourself." He reached out for me.

I sat on the edge of his bed; he rested his hand on top of my head and began to stroke my hair. How long had it been since he'd last done that? "It's nothing compared to what's happened to you, Father."

"It isn't a contest, you two," my mother scolded. "You've both had your fair share of hardships. Anyway, darling, I realize that Iris is worried about you, but you need to rest. You must be exhausted."

My father let out a wry chuckle and murmured, "I can't win against you."

"I'll be back, and then we can sit down and have a nice, long talk," I promised.

As far as I could tell, my father was acting completely normal. If I hadn't known about his injuries, I never would've guessed. Sitting there and watching him wouldn't change anything, so I agreed to leave the room to let him rest.

Luckily, his condition was still stable the next day, so we were

able to talk. We discussed everything that had come to pass since the last time we saw each other: my encounters with the Boltik family to the east, Van's conspiracy against me, everything that had happened with Dorssen, my catastrophe mitigation projects, the new insurance system we were developing, and so on.

Obviously, I'd sent him word about all these things, but this was the first time we were able to talk in person about them. It was also a good opportunity to tell him about the prince from Acacia who posed as an envoy to propose. I handed him the relevant documents, and he let out a deep sigh, followed by another.

I knew I'd just run into one incident after another, but this particular situation involved the entire kingdom, which meant I was obligated to alert the royal family. But even though my father was the prime minister and the duke of Armelia, he was for a moment rendered speechless.

"If you're asking my opinion as the prime minister, I'd say you'd be hard-pressed to find a better offer. And as the duke of Armelia, I'd say I wouldn't want to give up your talents to another country. In fact, I'd love to have you as an advisor. But if you're asking my opinion as your father, then I want you to make your own decision—one you'll be comfortable with. In other words, all I wish for is your happiness."

That response made me wonder where his good sense as a noble had gone. At the same time, I realized I was no closer to knowing my own response.

At the moment, it didn't matter. Hearing him wish for my happiness, and everything that meant, brought tears to my eyes, and they slid down my face.

The detached palace lacked the glitz and glamour of the main castle, but it was a grand affair with a tranquil aura. Berne had arrived at it for the first time, so he walked through it slowly, looking all around and observing all its details. The reason for his visit was an errand for his father, Louis de Armelia. The errand in question was quite simple—all he had to do was deliver a letter to the queen dowager, who resided there.

Louis had told him: “No one may see the contents of this letter. Not even a trusted servant.”

It must be incredibly important if Father said that, Berne thought to himself as he patted his breast pocket, which contained the letter. Perhaps his father feared betrayal, or perhaps learning the contents of the letter would endanger anyone who knew them? But judging by his father’s total and explicit trust in their servants, Berne thought the latter scenario was more likely.

Their servants were ordinary citizens. No matter how far they had been trained in self-defense, it wouldn’t take much for a skilled enemy to crush them. Berne had a feeling that this was what his father feared.

Once he was inside the detached palace, a servant showed him the way and led him to the queen dowager.

“My, I certainly never expected to see you here,” she said at the sight of him. “That must mean Louis is in bad shape indeed.”

“No, my father is only erring on the side of caution and recuperating at home; his wounds aren’t life-threatening. Actually, he wanted to come here today himself, but...”

“I see...”

“Instead, he gave me this to deliver to you.” Berne took out the letter and handed it to a servant.

The queen dowager took it from the servant and read the contents. The instant she looked down at it, her face changed. Her soft expression tightened and became that of a stern ruler. The sudden change in her demeanor filled Berne with tension.

“Do you know what this letter says?” she asked after she read it, and Berne shook his head. “Not a word of it?”

“No, nothing.”

“I see. Louis certainly has a soft spot for his children.” The queen dowager laughed out loud, but her eyes were cold. She regarded Berne as if she were sizing him up, which made a cold sweat run down his back. “Or perhaps it’s because you’re in a different camp than your father?”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I don’t know what you mean.”

“Hm? You and Edward have been friends since you went to school

together, no? I thought you belonged to that little coterie centered on Yuri Neuer.”

“I did get along well with Prince Edward...but I am of House Armelia. I take pride in the fact that I come from a long line of prime ministers and governors of the duchy. So my first priority is the stability of the government.”

“Then you want Edward to succeed the throne as soon as possible?”

“No. If the first prince protects and abides by the laws of the kingdom, then I think by all rights, he should succeed. Furthermore... Ah, it’s nothing. Forgive me.”

“Nothing you say here shall pass my lips again. Go ahead and speak your mind, child.” The queen dowager urged Berne to continue.

“Following my graduation...I was given the chance to reflect on my actions. After thinking deeply, I came to the conclusion that I was extremely proud to be a member of House Armelia and that I loved my family. Yet I almost destroyed them due to my foolishness during my time at the academy.” Berne wore a wry smile as he spoke. “So, I decided I can’t afford to make any further mistakes. I don’t wish to hurt those important to me, and since they’re important to me, I want to protect them. That was the decision I made.”

And that was why he could no longer back Edward.

First, the prince had broken his engagement with Iris. Then he had backed the church during Iris’s excommunication, then harassed the Azuta Corporation, and then raised tariffs on Armelia. While Edward had only directly participated in the harassment of the company, and by breaking his engagement, none of it would have happened without his influence.

Berne was grateful for all the things that had happened in his past, but he was also unwilling to let sentimentality prevent him from protecting the people most important to him. He was terribly serious about his decision.

“So you’d choose your family over the future of the kingdom?” the queen dowager asked in a sharp voice.

“I’m sorry.” All Berne could do was shamefully bow his head. A heavy silence filled the room.

The queen dowager's soft chuckle broke the silence. "That way of thinking is rather naive and unbecoming of a ruler. However, can someone who cannot protect those important to them protect their realm? Ho ho ho. I can't fault you for it."

Berne involuntarily let out a sigh in response.

"At present, the nobles of this kingdom are divided into two factions," the queen dowager went on. "One backs the first prince and the other backs the second. Leading the first prince's faction is House Armelia, influential local lords, and newly titled nobility. Those backing the second prince are led by Queen Ellia and House Marea, along with the older noble families. The two factions are facing off against each other while maintaining an equilibrium. Now, what faction do I stand with?"

Berne didn't have an answer. Or, to put it more accurately, he *couldn't* answer. Not only was he unsure of the truth, but this wasn't the place to offer it carelessly.

"The correct answer is that I'm neutral, but leaning toward the first prince," she informed him, knowing why Berne held his tongue. "I gave the first prince refuge, raised him as my own, and brought him up knowing the future held precisely this chaos. Why do you think that was?"

"To prevent the nobles from growing too impudent?"

"Go on."

Berne chose his words very carefully. "If the second prince overthrew the first prince and assumed the throne, there wouldn't be as much disorder. But if that happened, the nobles would grow too powerful for the king to control, and you thought that would shake the foundations of the monarchy. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Even still, I stood with the neutral faction, ready at any moment to abandon the first prince if he showed the least sign of foolishness. Instead, he surprised me with his abilities. So, I did nothing. But because of that, people think I am as aligned with him as a certain other house that has never publicly come out in support of him."

Berne knew she spoke of his family. He chuckled wryly within the confines of his mind.

"Contrary to popular belief, the second prince's faction does not

view House Armelia as its greatest obstacle. Rather, although I've retired from palace life, I am still a member of the royal family and carry great influence—I am the largest thorn in their side."

"Are you saying you're being targeted just as my father was...?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before they strip me of my authority as a member of the royal family. Your father and the first prince were working to prevent that. That's what the letter says."

"I see..."

"And now that I've read the letter, I can answer. I want you to give Louis this message: 'Don't worry about me. You return to the duchy and rest.'"

"Wh-what?! But why?"

"The king has only a month left, at most. After he dies, House Marea will make their move. Louis isn't expected to make a full recovery within a month, correct? He nearly died. I can't have him pushing himself."

"But..."

Then the queen dowager said, "I never thought Ellia would lay a finger on the king..."

Berne's breath caught in his throat when he realized the meaning of her words. "Are you certain of that?"

"Yes. It's true that His Majesty collapsed, but he was on the mend. Physically, at least. He was still as heartsick as ever, of course. But for the doctor to suddenly say he has but a month? There must be something else at work here. I have other...circumstantial evidence as well." The queen dowager bit her lip as she uttered that last sentence. It seemed that she lacked irrefutable proof, which meant she couldn't directly go after House Marea, and that must have frustrated her. "Because I love him, my hatred grew even deeper when my ire was stoked. At any rate, we don't have time, what with Louis's condition, and since the first prince has been sent to another kingdom."

"Which one?"

"That's a secret. But now I think it's for the best. I can't exactly say that the kingdom is safe, but it's better that he be somewhere else while all this is going on. Not to mention, he feels responsible for what

happened to the king.” The queen dowager hid her mouth behind a fan and let out a sigh.

“But what will you do, Your Majesty?”

“Well... I have decided to bet on the new generation—on him, no matter what. So I have no regrets.” As she declared this, the gleam in her eye only brightened. “Berne, make sure you deliver my message to Louis.”

“Of course.”

His audience with the queen dowager over, Berne quickly left the palace. While he walked the path back to his carriage alone, his gaze stopped on the impeccably manicured garden. Normally, he was consumed with his work as his father’s assistant, but occasionally, he would take a break and relax in the garden. He did so at the recommendation of his older sister, Iris. She said being out in nature would help ease his mind, and looking at things from a distance would let his eyes rest. He wasn’t sure if that was true or not, but she certainly seemed to believe so, and thus he had tried to make a habit of it.

As he looked out in the garden, he noticed a woman in the distance, sitting by herself. He was concerned to see her sitting directly on the ground, so he went over to her and said, “Excuse me... Are you feeling all right?”

“Eek! Ah, I’m sorry!” She must not have heard him approaching, because she let out a shriek of surprise. She turned toward him, her beautiful golden hair falling over her shoulder. “I was just thinking...” The girl looked embarrassed and turned her green eyes downward.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you while you were deep in thought. I was concerned that you had taken ill.”

“No... I don’t blame you for thinking that. I’m sure that’s what it must look like. I thought perhaps if I came out to the garden and sat here, it would clear my mind.”

“I see...” Berne chuckled, remembering his sister.

The woman looked uncomfortable on hearing him laugh; perhaps she thought he was laughing at her because he thought her behavior unsightly.

“Pardon me,” he said. “It’s just that I remembered my sister saying the same thing, and I couldn’t help but laugh. She told me that coming

out to the garden would ease my mind and help me think of things from a new point of view. So at her suggestion, I've often come out to the garden myself, when I have free time."

"Oh, really?! When I can't think clearly, it feels like I'm lost in a maze, thinking the same thing over and over again. Then I start to dwell on the most negative thoughts. But when I come out here, I can clear my mind, and things seem so much simpler."

"It's true. I've realized that even taking a short break is better than not taking one at all." When Berne saw the cheerful smile on the woman's face, he couldn't help but smile as well.

"I'm sorry for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Letty. And you are...?"

"I'm Berne. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise..." Letty smiled softly at him. "Do you speak with your sister often?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I have an older brother as well, so sometimes I wonder how close other siblings are."

"I don't think our case would be very helpful to you. Right after I entered the academy, I stopped speaking nearly so often to my sister. On top of that, something I did to her at that time...it left a very deep scar on her heart, one which I suspect will last her entire life."

"Do you regret it?"

"I can't say such a lighthearted thing. Merely regretting the past can't possibly atone for it. All I can do is feel remorse and ensure I never make the same mistake again. Although, I do want to grow to the point where I can help her when she needs it." Berne chuckled with chagrin. "Although, my older sister is so formidable that I'm not sure I *can* grow strong enough to ever be in the position to lend her aid."

"Goodness..."

"Forgive me, I'm just going on and on about myself. What about you, Letty? What's your relationship with your brother like?"

"It's wonderful. It's just...well, perhaps we're in the same situation."

"What do you mean?"

“All he does is protect me, and it’s so painful for me. That’s why I want to help my brother so much, but instead he does everything all by himself and says he doesn’t need my help.”

“I see...”

“If only I had been born a boy, then I could’ve stood with my brother as his equal,” Letty murmured, casting her gaze downward. Her voice was so full of emotion, it made Berne sad to hear it.

“For a long time, I was skeptical that women could do the same work as men,” said Berne. “Well, actually—maybe I wasn’t doubtful at all. Maybe it was just that only men were in my line of work.”

A gust of wind blew past, picking up flower petals from the garden and carrying them on the breeze. Letty lifted her face, either prompted by the wind or reacting to Berne’s words. Her gleaming golden hair billowed in the breeze.

“But watching my sister made me realize that what matters most when it comes to doing a good job is a person’s abilities and their mettle. In that regard, a person’s gender is trivial. Actually, my sister’s point of view as a woman introduces a new perspective that we haven’t seen before. Half of this kingdom’s population is women; it would be strange if we never took their opinions into account. So really, I don’t think good work has to do with someone’s gender, but more the strength of their will. If you want to help your brother, I’m sure you’ll be able to find a way.”

Letty’s eyes went wide with surprise for a moment, then she smiled happily. She looked like she’d come across a powerfully interesting idea. “That’s true. I know a woman who’s extremely capable in her work as well, so I don’t know why I’m feeling so insecure about it,” she said, then added quietly, “I wouldn’t expect anything less from Duchess Merellis’s daughter.”

Unfortunately, she said it so softly that Berne didn’t hear her.

“I’m so glad I got the chance to talk to you,” Letty declared. “I’d love to do it again sometime.”

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

“Please let me know the next time you come to the palace. This is where I normally work. If you ask for Letty, someone will come fetch me right away.”

“All right.”

After Berne agreed, Letty smiled at him once more and then left. He watched her go, then finally returned to the Armelia mansion.

Meanwhile, Lyle and Dida had entered the castle grounds. “So what if they’re getting a new knight commander? Why’d they call us here?” Dida complained, dragging his feet.

Normally, Lyle would admonish him for such behavior, but instead he merely frowned and stayed silent. He was dragging his feet just as much as Dida because he secretly agreed with him. He was just as irritated and didn’t understand why they had to come.

The duke of Armelia had just been attacked; neither of them wanted to leave Iris’s side for even a moment. That was why they had already declined to come several times. But the new knight commander wouldn’t relent. In fact, their presence had been requested along with General Gazell’s. The general had carefully considered their feelings, so he hadn’t mentioned it to them. Thus, when they heard about it via the letter which had been delivered by a knight, they had both been powerfully angry.

But neither of them wanted to cause trouble for their master, despite being highly annoyed by the entire situation. Therefore, the two of them came to the capital to get it over with. Regardless, neither could hide their bad moods as they strode through the castle grounds.

“I am Lyle, here on behalf of the duchy of Armelia.”

“Likewise here on behalf of Armelia, I am Dida.”

They both said as little as possible as they entered the room designated for the knights. A few of the men raised an eyebrow at their attitudes, but most of them looked toward them with a sympathetic eye. It just went to show how highly unusual the circumstances were.

“Ahh, Lyle and Dida! You came!” The new knight commander welcomed them cheerfully. “Take a seat right there.”

They obeyed the commander and sat.

“My name’s Sertreau Meleze, and I am the new knight

commander. I've heard a great deal about you both. Pleasure to meet you."

The two of them remained expressionless while Sertreau beamed.

"Well? What did you want from us?" Lyle asked in a voice so low that it almost made the ground rumble, clearly expressing his discontent.

Dida was honestly a bit surprised; it was unusual for Lyle to display his emotions like this.

"There's no need to rush. Why don't we just relax and have a nice, long chat?" Sertreau was a bit bewildered, but the smile on his face didn't falter.

However, this made Lyle's mood—and Dida's—seem even more hostile. Those knights in the room who were familiar with them tensed and backed away.

"We told you several times that we didn't have time to come here. Yet you kept pushing for us to come with no regard to our situation. On top of that you want to 'relax' and have a 'nice, long chat'? Is that why you bothered General Gazell, *a national hero*?" Lyle's anger had reached its peak. He could have killed a person with the daggers shooting from his eyes.

It was enough to intimidate even Sertreau, who stiffened in his seat.

"What do you want from us?" Dida asked, knowing he had to move the situation along.

"Ah... I just heard so much about you from the former knight commander, so I was hoping you'd join our order..." Sertreau had strategized a great deal in advance, devising ways to persuade these two men. None of his predecessors had been able to accomplish it. He'd believed he was different, that without a doubt, *he* would be able to win their favor. But the aura they emanated made clear that his hopes had been dashed from the start. And before he knew it, Sertreau had blurted out the true reason for their invitation.

"If you've heard about us, then I assume you've also heard that we've declined that request many times before?"

Even though the air in the room was already glacial, Sertreau thought he felt the temperature drop even further. "If it's about the

pay...”

“It has nothing to do with the pay. I serve one mistress and one mistress only. Nothing anyone says will change my mind.”

“The same goes for me.”

Sertreau was left stunned by this blunt refusal.

“Staying here any longer would be a waste of our time, so we’ll be going now,” said Lyle. “Our mistress and the general have lodged a complaint on our behalf regarding this incident. We’ve already received approval from the queen dowager to continue serving House Armelia, and we have requested that we no longer be forced to entertain further invitations such as this.”

Sertreau’s shoulders dropped at Lyle’s parting words.

Lyle and Dida left at a faster pace, now that they were on their way out. Although they both remained silent, the mood between them was much calmer.

“Well, if it isn’t Lyle and Dida!”

But their moods fell once again when someone stopped them. They suppressed those feelings as they both bowed.

“Raise your heads.”

It was the second prince’s fiancée, Yuri Neuer.

“We couldn’t possibly be so rude in front of the prince’s fiancée...” Both of them inwardly wondered what a woman was doing at the knights’ headquarters.

“What are you two doing here? Oh! Don’t tell me you’re finally going to join the knights?” Yuri’s voice was cheerful, a marked contrast to their moods.

“No...” said Lyle. “We are unworthy of the service.”

“That’s not true! I’ve heard many stories about your strength—both of you!”

The two remained silent.

Yuri kept talking. “Crime and banditry have continued to increase within the kingdom. That’s why I need your strength. I’d be able to work so much harder if I had the two of you to protect me!”

“We’re terribly sorry, but we have only one mistress,” said Lyle.

“We want to protect her because she cares more about protecting her people than herself. Therefore, we support her and give her strength,” Dida continued. “Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

The two bowed and left Yuri behind, rushing out of the castle grounds as quickly as they could. They hurried back to the Armelia mansion, letting out sighs of relief as soon as they arrived.

“What was she doing there?” Dida asked.

“No idea,” Lyle said. “But how dare they try to recruit us knowing that we’re already devoted to our mistress.”

Now that they were back at the mansion, they conversed normally with each other. Without even discussing it, they headed to the servant’s parlor.

“Whoever loses has to make the tea.”

“I made it last time, though.”

“That was last time.”

“We’re already at the parlor, though.”

“Doesn’t matter what kind of game we play as long as it doesn’t involve a sword.”

As the two of them bantered back and forth, they opened the parlor door. “Oh, you two are back already?” Tanya was inside, drinking tea.

“Oh, Tanya! Perfect timing. Make us some tea.”

“If you’re all right with herbal tea, I have plenty left in this pot. Go ahead and pour yourself a cup.”

“Whaaaat?” Dida grumbled, but he piped down under Tanya’s glare and quickly started making his own tea. In other words, he poured himself a cup from the pot. He went ahead and poured Lyle a cup too.

Lyle thanked him and took the cup as he sat down. “It was a waste of time,” he said.

“I figured as much. They tried to recruit you again, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“I swear, those knights never learn.”

“Well, they got a new knight commander now.” Dida joined their conversation as he leaned against the counter, sipping his tea.

“Sertreau Meleze?”

“You know him?”

“I’ve looked into him. He was a knight in name only, and there’s absolutely nothing on him even though he’s the new knight commander.”

“A knight in name only? How’d a guy like that get to be the commander?” Dida asked with an exasperated chuckle.

“It’s Queen Ellia’s doing. Many of the knights belong to the second prince’s faction, which is doubtless why they wanted to hurry to recruit you two.”

Lyle’s face grew bitter at Tanya’s explanation. “Well, whatever. More importantly, we saw the baron’s daughter, Yuri.”

“Eh?” Tanya looked baffled.

Dida nodded and added, “She tried to recruit us too. What in the world is she thinking?”

“Is that so...” Tanya let out a deep sigh, as if she were expelling all the air from her lungs. After Lyle and Dida detailed their meeting with Yuri, she stood. “I’m going to tell Lady Iris about your run-in with that woman.”

“Good.”

“Thanks for that.”

After they agreed, Tanya left. Dida and Lyle finished their tea in silence, then went about their business.

“Marriage, hm...”

In the end, my father told me that I needed to run the proposal by the royal family before giving an answer. This wasn’t the sort of thing that could be decided quickly anyway, so I supposed there was nothing I could do about it. However, the problem with bringing the proposal to the royal family was determining *whom* to bring it to.

The king was ill and incapable of attending to his royal duties. Queen Ellia was out of the question. Neither of the princes had decision-

making authority, and since one of them would become king, it might complicate the whole situation anyway.

That left me with the queen dowager... Though honestly, I wasn't sure who presently held the power in the royal family.

"Excuse me, my lady. Your dress has arrived from the madam."

As Tanya helped me get ready, I was inwardly impressed that Madam Crejours had made it on time. I'd come up with the main design for the dress, but I'd left the details to the heated discussions of Tanya and Madam.

The dress was low cut, showing off my collarbones, with a gauzy, sapphire-blue silk draped over my cleavage. The silk was studded with pearls which gleamed every time they caught the light. The dress was cinched in at the waist, and the color was a gorgeous ombre that went from pale aquamarine to the same sapphire as on my décolletage. The pleated skirt rippled prettily with every step I took.

I had specifically requested this ombre fabric from the madam. It was the Azuta Corporation's newest product. She'd mentioned it would be nice to have something like that, so the product development team at Azuta had produced it after much research and experimentation. Apparently, the trick was in the dyeing process.

Since the madam had come up with the idea, we had made a contract with her so that she would have priority for the fabric. I'd suggested that she receive a cut of the profits from sales, but she insisted that "just having this lovely fabric is enough for me." I supposed that was just like her.

I wore my hair in a loose updo, fastened with a diamond clip. All I had to do now was put on my choker and I was done.

That night, I would be attending the first ball of the season, hosted by the royal family, which was the event that kicked off the social season in Tasmeria. Children of the nobility aged twelve to eighteen attended to greet the king and make their debut into high society. The closest thing I could compare it to in my previous life was a debutante ball. The reason it applied to such a wide range of ages was because the decision of when to make the child's social debut was left up to each individual family. You see, after their debut, the child would be treated as an adult, with all the responsibilities that went along with it.

In other words, the earlier your debut, the more time you had to build up connections, but thereafter, you also wouldn't be given any slack, since you were no longer considered a child. It was like offering up a sweet, innocent lamb to a lion's den. Therefore, most families waited until their children were fourteen or fifteen and had a bit more worldly experience. After all, if you waited too long, people would grow suspicious and wonder if some kind of underlying problem was delaying your debut.

Personally, I had made my social debut at age thirteen. Queen Ellia had said there would be more advantages than disadvantages, and furthermore, Ed had also made his debut at that age. As I was his fiancée, it was decided that I should follow suit.

This was all a long time ago now, of course.

Shortly after I finished getting ready, Berne arrived to escort me. "I'm sorry I made you wait."

"Not at all. Are you sure about this, though?" I asked, to which he gave me a puzzled look.

"What do you mean?"

"Escorting me tonight. I feel like I'm always asking favors of you, and I'm sorry for that."

I did indeed always ask Berne to escort me when I had an official function to attend. Since I was so busy with work, I didn't exactly have time to meet anyone to court. But at the same time, it would have been gauche to attend alone. My father had said as much to Berne when he asked if my brother would play the role.

Honestly, I wanted Berne to stop worrying about me and find a wife. Every time he came to an event with me, he stuck by my side so faithfully it was like he was my guard dog, even though a party such as this was the prime opportunity for him to meet someone.

I was especially looking forward to welcoming the next generation of the Armelia family due to my current position... Though these stray thoughts that led to memories of what had happened with Yuri made my head hurt. Thankfully, I felt that I was at last mostly over her.

"Please don't worry about that, Sister. You work so much, you don't have time to find another escort." Berne gave me a wry smile as he extended a hand. I took it and stood. "You look beautiful, as usual."

“Many thanks.”

We chatted with each other in the carriage as we headed to the palace. The gorgeous palace—even though I was in the midst of such a beautiful scene, my heart sank. Being brought here now felt like I was being led to the gallows. This was now enemy territory, where Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea acted as de facto rulers.

I walked arm in arm with Berne as we entered the castle. Suddenly, it felt like all eyes were on us. I reacted calmly with a smile, but deep down, I cursed our onlookers.

“It’s so nice to see you again, Lady Iris.”

“Likewise, Lord Sagitalia.”

I let out an inward sigh. I’d just set foot inside, and already I was wrapped up in conversation with some strong characters. Count Sagitalia was the minister of finance, though for some reason, he looked older than the last time I’d seen him. I wasn’t sure if it was on account of how many years it had been or because the rigors of his obligations had taken their toll on him. In case of the latter, it was no doubt due to the battle for succession. Or perhaps some other business within the ministry was plaguing him.

I was too afraid to ask. At the same time, what frightened me most was how easily I coaxed the truth from him during the course of conversation.

“How is Lord Armelia?” he asked.

“Thank you for your concern. Out of an abundance of caution, my father is at home recuperating, but he’s doing well. He’s taking it easy under my mother’s watchful eye, and I think he’s improved greatly because of it.”

“Hrm, I’m glad to hear it.”

“As a matter of fact, you’re looking quite pale, Lord Sagitalia. Are you so very busy of late?”

“Humph. Perhaps you’re right. To be honest, I’ve been considering going home to recuperate myself in a bit.”

“My, is that so?” I did my best not to show it on my face, but I was so shocked that my heart skipped a beat. The word *impossible!* flashed through my mind. As the minister of finance, Count Sagitalia was often as swamped with work as my father, and he rarely had the

time to return to his domain unless he specifically scheduled a holiday.

Now that the battle for succession had intensified, court was practically a game of musical chairs. Could he really afford to be away at such a critical time? To me, it sounded as if he were declaring: “Go ahead and oust me!”

And to think the last time I saw him, he was speaking so highly of the future the first prince would bring to us. He knew better than anyone that, as one of the most influential people in the first prince’s faction, it would do great damage to that prince’s cause if the count were ousted. That had to mean that the count had no other choice but to take a leave of absence due to the machinations of House Marea. At least, that was the most plausible explanation I could think of.

“Is this on account of my father’s collapse?” I glanced around and lowered my voice. Was the count worried about his own safety because of what had happened? I knew he would understand my implication.

“Yes and no. The hustle and bustle of the city has exhausted me and my family. I wish to return to my domain and rest to gather strength for when I’m truly needed. Even at my age, I can’t let go of my dreams.”

Judging by that comment, he wasn’t withdrawing his support from the first prince.

“I see,” I said. “But if you leave at a crucial time such as this, won’t that cause trouble for the rest of the people at the ministry? I’ve heard they’ve expressed discontent with the increasing price of food at the port.”

“You sound quite familiar with the goings-on at the capital. You’re probably right, but there’s nothing I can do about things that happen naturally. Nowadays these merchants are so sensitive, anyway...”

“Isn’t that the truth!”

We looked at each other and laughed. But his eyes weren’t smiling, and I knew that mine weren’t either. We were paying careful attention, each sizing up the other’s true intentions and trying to discern whether the other had picked up the hidden messages concealed in our conversation. They say that sometimes, eyes speak louder than mouths.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me. The others will be cross with me if I

keep the belle of the ball all to myself.” With that, Count Sagitalia took his leave.

I could call myself nothing but satisfied with our conversation. I had asked him many questions that had been burning in my mind.

I turned and looked around the ballroom. It wasn’t long before I spotted a familiar face—Mimosa. I rushed over to her as quickly as I could without seeming unsightly.

“Lady Mimosa! It’s so good to see you again.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you as well, Lady Iris.”

Even though we were close friends, we still had to observe certain formalities. This was a formal event, so Mimosa and I conversed differently than we normally would.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lady Iris.” All of a sudden, a man stepped in front of me from the side and spoke. I wasn’t sure if he had curled his black hair on purpose or if it was naturally wavy. He had narrow eyes and a mole beneath one of them that stood out.

I was about to frown at him for this rude behavior, but I did my best to suppress it and smiled at him. The instant he spoke to me, Mimosa’s face went pale. It seemed almost like the color had left her eyes. I saw this out of the corner of my eye, and immediately a sour feeling rose within me. I had *never* seen Mimosa like that before.

“Hello. I’m terribly sorry, but you are...?”

“Oh, didn’t Mimosa tell you about me? I’m Dan Rubellia, the eldest son of Lord Rubellia of House Rubellia, a very old and honorable family,” he informed me with a theatrical gesture. “I am also Mimosa’s fiancé.”

This was a formal, public event at the castle, the sort of event where one *never* spoke first to one of higher class—in other words, since he was the son of a count and I was the daughter of the duke *and* the prime minister, it was beyond bad taste for him to suddenly butt into my conversation. Furthermore, essentially every single person in this room hailed from “very old and honorable” families. I could have delivered a tidal wave of critiques to this man from his introduction alone. But the thing that had left me truly stunned was his last sentence.

He was Mimosa’s fiancé?! Those were the only words in my head. I was the last person to criticize someone’s choice of a fiancé, and I

really hated to think it at all, but in all honesty, my first impression of him was dreadful.

“Oh...you are?” I said. “I’m sure you already know, but I’m Iris Lana Armelia. Mimosa and I went to the academy together. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

Dan seemed poised to say something further, but Mimosa interrupted him. “Lady Iris. Pardon me, but we have to go greet the other guests, so if you’ll excuse us...”

“O-of course. I’m so sorry to keep you.”

As soon as I said that, Mimosa turned and left. Dan shot me a wry smile and shrugged, then quickly caught up to walk by her side. I watched them leave. Of course, if this was their first official social gathering together since becoming engaged, it was perfectly normal for them to do the rounds and say their hellos to everyone, but it had just seemed so abrupt when she said it. It was almost like...Mimosa didn’t want to talk to me.

Once my thoughts reached that point, I let out a soft chuckle. Why was I so surprised? They were newly engaged. No matter how close you were to a friend, you didn’t really want them imposing on your new betrothed. For one, it would be highly inappropriate in public, but more importantly, I doubted Mimosa would enjoy it on an emotional level either. I could therefore understand why she might act a little unusual. It was nerve-racking to appear in public with your fiancé for the first time.

Of course it had grown worse later, but even when happy to be Ed’s fiancée, I had been incredibly nervous at our first public event together, and it had made me uneasy to speak with other women. I decided I would try to meet with Mimosa later in private so we could catch up.

As I thought, I gazed absently toward the back of the ballroom. Just then, the music stopped, and the royal family appeared. Everyone in the room automatically bowed their heads, including me. The queen dowager entered first, followed by Queen Ellia and Prince Edward. Apparently, the king and the first prince would yet again not be attending. After Ed made his entrance, Yuri followed close behind. It looked like he was tugging on her hand.

What are you doing here?! I thought instantly.

Yuri was Ed's fiancée, but she was still *just* his fiancée. She would be a royal, but since they weren't officially married yet, it was absolutely unheard of for her to use the same entrance as the members of the royal family.

To borrow a phrase from my mother: You never know what might happen before a wedding.

Queen Ellia had been queen for many years now, but before that, she was the daughter of a marquis, so she should have been more well versed in proper etiquette and protocol. The fact that the queen had approved this appearance just went to show that Yuri had truly captured her heart, just as she had captured those of the nobles who belonged to the second prince's faction.

If she hadn't, there was no way Queen Ellia would've granted approval for this entrance. I wasn't sure what exactly the queen felt for Yuri, but at the very least, the fact that Yuri had strong-armed her way into this appearance meant that her status in society was firmly cemented. And that sent a chill down my spine.

For the ball, she wore an ivory dress with a large, frilly ribbon on the bodice. Matching ribbons adorned the cuffs of her sleeves, with several layers of lace on the trim. It still resembled dresses she wore before, which emphasized her cuteness, but the design was showy and elaborate, akin to what a member of the royal family would wear.

The royal family took their seats in the ornate chairs reserved just for them. Once again, the music began to play.

Shortly afterward, the young men and women who were making their social debuts this year appeared. High society etiquette differed from kingdom to kingdom, but the customs and traditions of Tasmeria's debutante ball were especially unique. During the afternoon, each young person set to make their debut had an official audience with the royal family to extend their greetings. Then at night, they made their debut in front of the kingdom's nobility.

The young men wore a flower in their lapels, while the young women wore one in their hair. The flower was a light pink, resembling something like a corn lily in my previous world. I wasn't sure if this flower symbolized the same thing in this world, but from what I remembered, it signified "great pride." So perhaps the flowers meant,

“Hold your head high and be proud as a noble.” Besides the flowers, the young women wore simple white dresses and the men wore formal black suits.

The men led their partners to the center of the room, and they all began to dance. After the dance was over, everyone applauded. Now the festivities of a usual ball commenced. Berne and I took our turn on the dance floor, and then I danced with a few of the men I’d met at Baron Messi’s party. After a few songs, I excused myself to take a break in the corner of the room. I held my champagne in one hand as I watched the other dancers. Berne had also decided to take a break, and he stood by my side.

Ed and Yuri were in the center of the dance floor. It seemed that they had been dancing too. Furthermore, since they were engaged, they danced every song with each other without switching partners. Mimosa and Dan did the same thing nearby. My eyes were glued to my friend as she moved, and a strange sadness came over me. To think that my best friend would suddenly feel so far away...

“Sister.” Berne’s voice pulled me out of my reverie. I was just about to ask why he sounded so tense, but when I followed his gaze, I got my answer. Just as one song ended and the other was beginning, I noticed that for some inexplicable reason, Ed was on his way toward us, Yuri in tow. I had no desire to speak with him, so I frantically looked around for someone, anyone who I could engage with instead, but unfortunately, there was no one.

Yuri already had her sights set on me, and she came straight toward us with a grin on her face. I had a sinking feeling that I wouldn’t have been able to escape her even if I had found someone else to talk to. The people around us had begun to notice their approach, and I heard a hushed silence fall over the room as all eyes turned to us.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Lady Iris. Berne.”

“Likewise, Lady Yuri,” I responded with a smile that matched her own. Berne bowed but said nothing.

“I’ve been hearing a lot about you from so many people, Lady Iris. You’re quite the workaholic, aren’t you? It’s a shame that you don’t make it to the capital very often, but everyone *really* misses you, you know. I see that Berne is your escort *again* tonight. Feel free to bring someone else for a change next time.”

“Oh, thank you ever so much for the helpful suggestion. I’ve heard you’ve been focusing your energy on your charities of late. I’d expect nothing less from Prince Edward’s fiancée. You had *such* a wonderful entrance into the ball.”

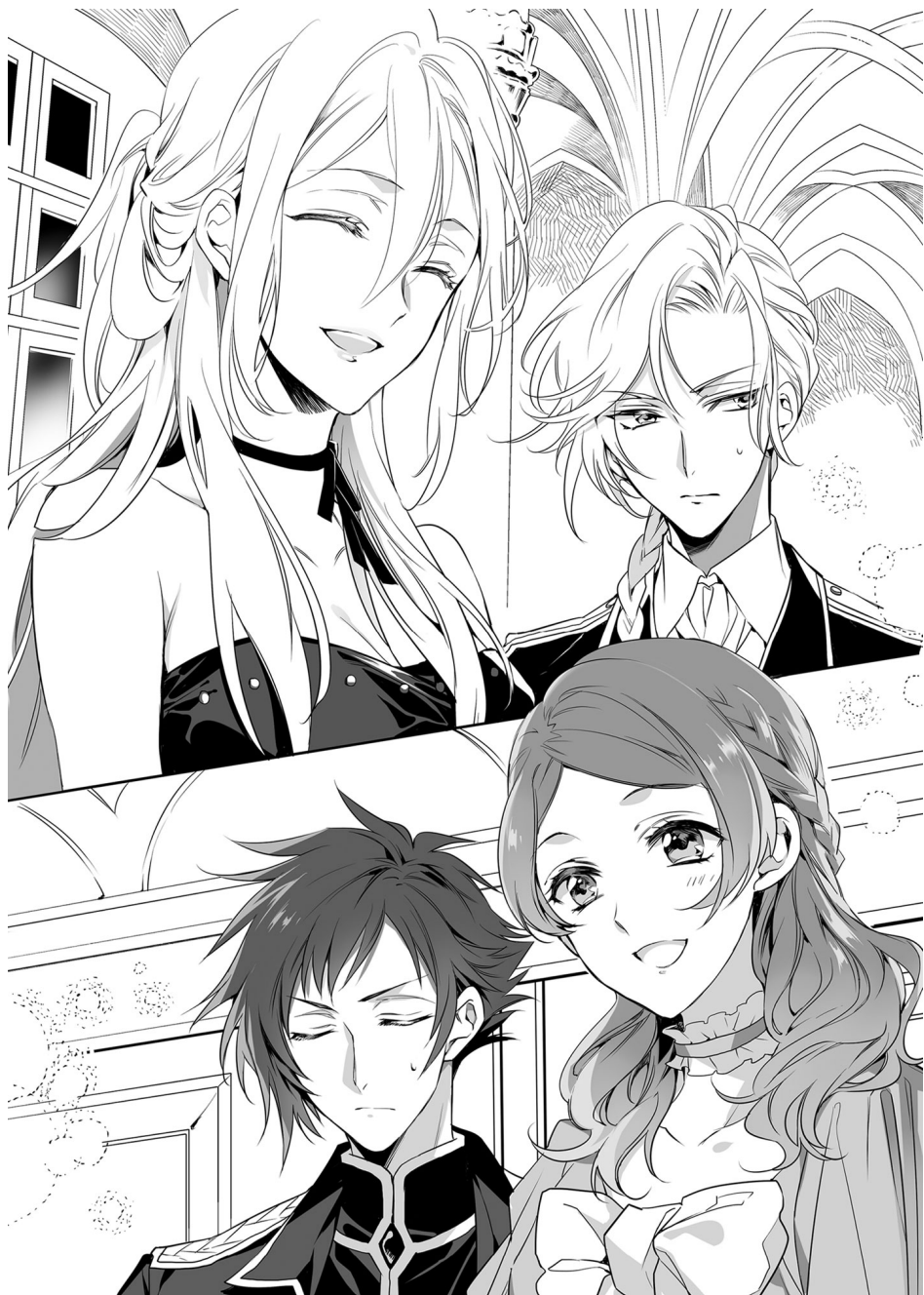
“Hearing that from you gives me so much confidence! By the by, Lady Iris—once again, you’re wearing such a gorgeous dress. Is it another new design?”

“Thank you. I’m honored to receive a compliment from you, Lady Yuri. This is a new design done in collaboration with Azuta Corporation and Madam Crejourns.”

“Is that right? I’d love to wear a dress like that, but I’m just not sure it would suit me as it does you... How could I possibly wear that design after you’ve pulled it off so flawlessly?”

“Oh, you flatter me! But you know, we have other designs that would enhance your adorable features, Lady Yuri.”

“Yuri, I think it’s about time...” Ed suddenly spoke up, interrupting our conversation. We made eye contact briefly, but he grimaced as if he had seen something utterly disgusting, then quickly looked away. At least he wasn’t trying to make snide comments like last time.



“All right! If you’ll excuse us, Lady Iris.” Yuri and Ed quickly walked away, arm in arm.

“Phew...” I let out a sigh, suddenly exhausted.

“Would you like a new drink?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks though, Berne.” I was grateful for his concern, but at the same time that meant the exhaustion was showing on my face, so I quickly drew myself up and regained my composure. Just then, a familiar face caught my eye. “Oh! It’s good to see you again, Rudy.”

It was my cousin, Rudius Gib Anderson. “It’s been a long time, Lady Iris. Lord Berne.”

“It’s unusual to see you at a function like this. Usually you say you’re too busy with work to attend such things.”

“I was ordered to attend.”

“Goodness!” I giggled at the exasperation in his voice. “Well, since you’re here, would you like to go over there and chat with us for a bit? Or do you need to continue making the rounds?”

“No, that’s fine.”

And so the three of us went out to the balcony.

“That looked a bit rough back there,” Rudy said.

I gave him a wry smile. “I know. I have no idea what she was trying to accomplish.”

“You must’ve learned a lot from that conversation. Eh, Berne?”

“Hm? Ah, yes...” Berne said.

I gave Rudy a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“About the facade women put on in public versus their true feelings. It becomes especially obvious to anyone who gets to watch a conversation like the one you just had with Lady Yuri.”

“Does it? What did it sound like to you, Rudy?”

“Well, what Lady Yuri really meant was, ‘How long do you plan on dragging your brother around to parties? You’re working so much you can’t even find a man.’ And then in response, you said, ‘That’s really rich, coming from someone who stole someone else’s fiancé. You’re really something else, pretending to be a royal even though you

aren't one yet.' That's about the long and short of it."

I laughed. "I think that's pretty accurate."

It was true that I had interpreted Yuri's comments just as Rudy had, and that was what had prompted my response. Even as we talked about dress designs, I knew we had each been thinking cruel thoughts about the other.

"You rarely come to events like this, but that's not the impression I get from you at all. I genuinely think you're amazing," said Rudy.

"You're complimenting me?"

"Definitely."

"Oh, Rudy!" The three of us burst out laughing. It reminded me so much of our childhood days that a surge of nostalgia washed over me. "Seriously, though—it really does feel like I haven't seen you in ages, Rudy. Was your boss mad at you because you haven't been attending these functions at all?"

"No, not at all. My boss is away on a sensitive job at present, and generally he prefers that I not come to such things, just in case my attendance is scrutinized because of who our grandfather is. So I've just been doing my work here in the capital instead."

"Oh, I see. I'm sure you're under a lot of pressure working in the capital. There's no room for error."

"Isn't that the same for you, Berne?" Rudy asked. Berne smiled wryly while Rudy continued. "I've heard you're working quite hard. I'm sure you're overwhelmed with all number of difficult tasks due to Uncle Louis's state. In fact, I heard you've been doing almost twice as much your normal workload."

"I am doing quite a bit, but I still have to get Father's approval for everything."

"Well, of course. Still, you're doing a great job. That's the Armelian blood in you."

I was quite surprised at their conversation. I'd known Berne was working under my father, but I'd had no idea he shouldered so much responsibility. I mused over how close my brother and my cousin remained to this day. Since House Armelia and House Anderson were so close, the cousins saw each other often during the social season. But Berne and Rudy were also close in age, which I was sure contributed to

it a lot as well. Now they traded jokes and laughed with smiles on their faces, just as they'd done as small boys. As they grew older, they had fewer chances to see each other. I watched over them fondly; seeing them together like this really brought back memories.

"Pardon me, you two."

"Where are you going, Sister? I can come with you."

"You're coming with me to the powder room? Don't worry. I'll come straight back." I left the balcony and headed back into the ballroom, then made my way to the ladies' waiting room. At parties like this, there were always separate waiting rooms for ladies and gentlemen. One could take a rest or freshen up there. I was sure they were both a bit worried about me, but I really needed to take a break from the party before I did or said something that might cause a stir. I really was intending to go straight back.

It was eerily silent in the waiting room, despite the lively ball in full swing just outside. I'd assumed the ladies' room would be packed, but there wasn't another soul around. All of a sudden, I heard whispers coming from somewhere. Of course it wasn't unusual to find people gossiping steps away from a ball such as this. I thought nothing of it as I started to walk past the room, but once I started to make out words, I stopped in my tracks.

"Dan, what in the world are you thinking, asking me to meet you here? I've got to get back to him."

"You're no fun at all."

The woman's tone of voice was different than usual, and the man didn't say her name, but I was certain that the woman was Yuri. And the man she called Dan was none other than Mimosa's brand-new fiancé, whom I'd just met minutes ago.

You've got to be kidding me, I thought as the blood drained from my face.

"I know you're forcing yourself. You act so fake when you're with him. I thought at the very least that you could relax and be yourself here."

"I didn't ask for your help. I have to get back."

"Ahh, please wait, Lady Yuri!"

I knew it was her! I thought as soon as I heard her name, and I let

out a sigh. And what did Dan mean by she “acted so fake” when she was around Ed? Did he know who she really was?

“Forgive me for making such a ridiculous excuse,” he said. “To be honest...I’m in love with you. That’s why I wanted to see you alone.”

I peeked through the slightly open door at the two of them. Dan was on one knee and had Yuri’s hand clasped in his. He planted a kiss on top of it.

“You always get the best of me, Dan... I wanted to see you alone too.”

“Oh, Lady Yuri...” His voice was strained with emotion as he swept her into his arms.

And she *let him*.

“I’m the daughter of a baron, yet my father told me to go find a good husband myself. I was lucky that Ed fell in love with me at first sight, but in exchange, I had to cast my true self aside. But you brought out the real me. That’s why I can always breathe easy when I’m by your side.”

I was starting to think that Dan *didn’t* actually know Yuri’s true nature. To put it simply, I suspected that he merely believed that the way she was speaking now was her actual personality, and the way she usually behaved was nothing more than an act.

“But now you belong to another woman...” Yuri trailed off sadly, and Dan hastily spoke up.

“My heart will only ever belong to you, though!”

Under normal circumstances, I would have thought that I should ask Tanya to look into the relationship between Yuri and Dan, or to see if he or his family had any connections to Tweil, but that was the last thing on my mind. Because that was when it really hit me—Dan was Mimosa’s fiancé.

Up until this point, I had only idly thought that Yuri had gained another pawn. But *this* pawn was my most precious friend’s fiancé. And given the happy letter Mimosa had sent me, she genuinely believed that she loved him and was loved in return. When the truth of this matter was revealed, I wouldn’t be watching some stranger in pain. This was my *friend*, and she was being betrayed by her fiancé, just as I had been. Imagining what was in store for Mimosa made me see red.

I whirled around and made a beeline for the ballroom, determined to find her. The only thing I could think at that moment was that I had to speak with Mimosa.

“Lady Mimosa.”

It didn’t take me long to find her at all; she was alone, leaning up against the wall.

“What’s the matter, Lady Iris?”

“Will you come with me? There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“I’m sorry, but...”

“It won’t take long.”

Mimosa tried to decline, but I persisted. She seemed to realize it was serious, because she thought for a moment, then agreed to come with me, if only for a few minutes. I took her by the hand and led her to the first empty room I could find.

“Mimosa. Where is your fiancé right now?”

“I don’t know. He said he was going to rest for a bit in the waiting room. He’s probably tired from having talked to so many people tonight.”

She was right about one thing; he was in a waiting room, but he was with Yuri. I didn’t have to hear Mimosa tell me that to be sure of where he was, though. The reason I asked was because I was desperately hoping that somehow, some way, I had been wrong. That maybe it hadn’t been him after all. Some part of me still hoped that deep down inside.

“Mimosa, I don’t know how else to tell you this...but I think it’s for the best if you break off your engagement.”

“What are you talking about? You know that there’s no going back now that we’ve just announced it publicly.”

“There’s still time! He’s not right for you.” I wanted to tell her why, but I just couldn’t. The thought of hurting her was too much to bear—even though I knew that not telling her would also end with her pain.

“Stop it. I’m the only one who knows what’s best for me. If this is what you have to say to me, then I’m leaving.”

Mimosa turned her back on me, but I reached out and grabbed her hand. "Wait! He has an awful reputation when it comes to women. So Mimosa..."

She roughly shook off my grip. Her reaction made my mind go completely blank.

"I don't care," she said. "Not as long as he comes back to me in the end."

As soon as I saw the look in her eyes, it hit me. "Wait... You know, don't you?"

Mimosa's eyes wavered slightly. "Who cares? I'm saying that it's fine with me."

"It's not fine at all! You're my friend, and I care about you! I can't support your engagement knowing you won't be happy."

"I decide my own happiness. And being with Edward makes me happy.' You were the one who said that after I raised my doubts about Edward. And I'm happy being with Dan. So I don't want to hear another word about him!"

"The reason I'm saying this is *because* of what happened with Ed!" I cried impulsively, my emotions surging. "Until the end, I honestly wanted to be happy with Ed! I thought as long as he stayed with me, I didn't care what he did! I thought that my family could give him power. I stayed by his side because I thought I had an obligation to him. But it was all meaningless!" Tears ran down my cheeks. I could no longer control my feelings. "At some point, I started to fill my heart with darkness. And I hated myself for it, but that just made it worse. Mimosa, I never want you to feel that way."

"Iris, your behavior is unbecoming of a noble," Mimosa said, expressionless. "You thought you'd be happy just being by his side? You didn't actually think that. You just wanted him to give you his heart in return, didn't you? That's not the conduct of a noble lady." Her voice was calm. "We're bluebloods. It's our duty to carry on our family's lineage and protect it. That's why our mothers and grandmothers, and their mothers before them, married for political reasons. That is the responsibility of the nobility, isn't it?"

I couldn't respond. She was right.

"So it doesn't matter to me how many women he has on the side,

as long as he comes home to me at the end of the day. The most important thing about a political marriage is carrying on the bloodline. And if what I'm doing benefits my family, then I can't think of anything that would make me happier. That's why you had the wrong approach to marriage, Iris."

Her words cut into me like knives. "Are you sure about this, Mimosa?"

"Yes. I'd rather live with my feet firmly planted on the ground than chase after an unrequited love. That's what I've made up my mind to do." The conviction in her voice made me snap back to reality.

"I see. I'm sorry for meddling, then. If that's your decision, then there's nothing else I can say about it."

Mimosa smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. They almost looked sorrowful. "Well, I can't keep him waiting any longer. If you'll excuse me."

She left without giving me the chance to answer. She probably didn't want to hear it.

"You haven't made up your mind at all..." I murmured to myself as I watched her go.

A marriage of convenience for political reasons was a natural thing for a noble to do. It was our duty. Even I was thinking of how I could use a marriage to the prince of Acacia to my advantage, after all. So I knew that this was all just my own selfishness. But still...

"I don't want you to marry for your family. I want you to be happy." I wanted to see the genuine smile on Mimosa's face again, the one I'd grown up seeing every day.

I trudged back into the ballroom. So much time had passed since I left that Berne and Rudy were likely looking for me. I let out a soft sigh as I moved my heavy feet forward, one step at a time. Just then, I spotted a familiar face up ahead.

"Oh, Lady Iris!"

And of course, it was the last person in the world I wanted to see

right then. Her carefree tone perfectly matched the bright smile on her face.

“Lady Yuri... Whatever are you doing out here? I’m sure the prince is looking for you.”

“I’m sure he is. But I have business with you.”

I raised an eyebrow, wondering what in the world she could possibly have to say to me. She sashayed over to me, then leaned forward to whisper into my ear. “You saw, didn’t you?”

I didn’t even have to ask what she meant, but I was so surprised that I automatically took a step backward.

“I mean, it’s fine. It’s not like anyone would believe you anyway,” she giggled.

An icy shiver ran down my spine like a snake slithering in the grass. I couldn’t argue with Yuri. If I raised a fuss about what I saw without any proof, it was guaranteed that everyone would say I was just trying to ruin her reputation—and then I would be the one under attack.

“Remember what I said? Everyone’s *so* lonely here in the capital without you. So I asked the queen to at least make sure that your best friend wouldn’t be lonely.”

I bit my lip. If I hadn’t, the dark feelings inside of me would’ve exploded, and I would have screamed at her.

“You should worry about yourself and those around you. Or else I’ll be forced to do it for you.”

That was all Yuri said before she left.

I stood there alone, my hands clenched into tight fists. I have no idea how long I stood there for before I heard a voice.

“What’s the matter, Sister?”

“You look pale as a ghost! Are you feeling sick?”

Rudy and Berne found me standing there. As soon as I saw them, I thought I would burst into tears.

Don’t cry. Don’t you dare cry! I chastised myself. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry. I was just feeling a bit dizzy.”

“Maybe you should rest for a bit longer?”

“No, I’m fine now. Let’s hurry back.”

The two of them looked even more worried about me, but I started walking, telling myself the entire time to keep smiling. I was ashamed to have anything less than a smile on my face. No matter how sad I was, or how much my emotions swayed me, I absolutely had to keep my true feelings hidden behind the mask of a smile, because my father had entrusted the good name of House Armelia to me.

I told myself that I had to pay attention and analyze the motives of the nobles at court and the balance of power. I had to charm them. I had to steel myself and elevate my own worth and presence. I had to carry myself as a true lady in the manner in which my mother had taught me. I had to control the room. I had to go to the different crowds and get them to tell me all manner of things, then circulate the useful information I gleaned to my family. I had to do this to show House Armelia’s power.

That was what I had to do to survive in the lion’s den.

I wouldn’t have said that the ball ended smoothly, but at least it ended. I got into my carriage and returned to the mansion. Berne sat next to me, looking out at the scenery.

“How are you feeling, Sister?” he asked, having noticed my gaze.

“I’m feeling a bit dizzy again. I’m probably just tired. I’ll go to bed as soon as we get home.”

“That might be for the best.”

I quickly looked out the window to escape his look of concern and any other questions he might ask me. Silence fell upon the carriage once again. The clomping of the horses’ hoofbeats sounded especially loud now.

“Hey, Berne?” I asked, breaking the silence. “Why did you fall in love with Yuri?”

My brother looked at me, his eyes widening with surprise. “... Because I was dreaming.” But he quickly recovered, a sheepish smile spreading across his face.

“Dreaming?”

“Yes. A dream that seemed so sweet, I lost myself in it.”

“I see...” A dream... That was possibly the perfect word to describe her. “Must one always wake up from a dream?”

“Once one thinks they must wake up, yes.”

I wondered if Dan would ever want to wake up. No one but him could know the answer to that. All I could do was hope that the time would come.

Just then, we arrived at the mansion. I said my good nights to everyone and went to my room, where I immediately got into bed and lay down. I wrapped myself tightly in my blankets to try to stave off the tremors that ran through my body. At that moment, the emotion overriding all others within me was anger.

I was still too weak, and Yuri had only grown more powerful during my time away from the capital. I could never be sure if the sentiments others held toward her were genuine, but she'd still grown powerful enough that people no longer looked down on her as a baron's daughter. She had bewitched people and built up her allies, and this was the result: I was powerless to help my friend. The only thing I had managed to do was be foolishly honest with Mimosa to the point that I almost begged her, which only ended in her hurt confusion.

I was frustrated with my own pathetic performance. I furiously raised my fist and started punching my pillow. The airy sound of the feathers filled the room. I did it again and again, searching for an outlet for my emotions. The pain distressed me to no end.

Even though I was lying down, my emotions were so intense that I didn't feel sleepy at all. No matter how much I didn't want it to be so, the darkness of night always gave way to the rising morning sun. I passed the night without sleeping at all.

Come morning, I let out a sigh and changed my clothes. I ate breakfast and went right to my desk to start on my work. I had a great deal of pressing business and reports that needed my approval. I had to focus, because I didn't have much time to do work while I was at the capital. But I was just too tired to think straight. Actually, the real problem was probably that my emotions had carried over from one day to the next.

“Excuse me,” Tanya knocked on the door and entered.

“Tanya, there’s something I need to ask you.”

I’d agonized over whether to ask Tanya to investigate Mimosa’s fiancé the entire night. My father had cautioned me to steer clear of Yuri, and Mimosa herself had told me that she didn’t want me sticking my nose into her business. But I wouldn’t forgive myself if I never found out the truth, and I was sick of having regrets that came too little and too late. I could figure out what to do once I knew the entirety of the situation. That was the decision I’d made.

It was my own selfishness that got Tanya involved. I knew asking her to investigate Yuri might put her in danger, and I thoroughly explained those risks to Tanya.

But when I was finished asking her my favor, she merely smiled and said, “Of course, my lady.”

Once Tanya received her secret mission from Iris, she immediately got to work. Of course she would use caution while investigating Yuri, but she was always engaged in dangerous business, so this job didn’t scare her in the slightest. Yet she was fully prepared to never let down her guard, not even for a moment.

It didn’t take long at all for her to gather information regarding Mimosa’s fiancé. House Dunglely protected their personal information quite closely, so this just went to show that Tanya was exceptionally skilled at what she did.

The problem was acquiring information concerning Yuri. Tanya tried every tactic she could think of, but she kept coming up empty. It was like all information on that woman had been very thoroughly erased, leaving only scraps that were too good to be true. Despite Yuri’s squeaky clean, adorable image, some very powerful person had to be backing her.

Tanya let out a sigh and turned a corner from the busy main street to a completely deserted back alleyway. She readied her hidden weapon and focused her senses on the presence she’d detected a few minutes ago. This always happened when she was trying to dig up information

relating to Yuri.

She relaxed, and in the next moment, she moved as quickly as she possibly could. Her sudden disappearance must have startled the one watching her, because they froze. She aimed her concealed weapon, a very long, sharp, needle-like instrument, toward them.

“Waah! Stop, stop! I mean no harm!”

Her opponent seemed to be remarkably skilled. They immediately sensed that Tanya was moving toward them and made eye contact with her, raising their hands to prove their claim. Even so, Tanya did not drop her weapon, though she did stop to assess her opponent.

He was a man no taller than a youth, and he wore ordinary clothes that one might see on any commoner in any town. His keen, cat-like eyes were his only remotely noteworthy features. Otherwise, he looked completely unremarkable. If one saw him in a crowd, they’d think him nothing more than a young local.

“You really have grown,” the man murmured, sounding both exasperated and impressed, yet not the least bit frightened at having a weapon pointed at him. He introduced himself in a casual manner. “If you must know, I call myself Milo. Just don’t ask me who I work for. Oh, and the reason I said I *call* myself Milo is because it’s a fake name. But that’s what I go by just the same.”

Was he oblivious to the fact that he was in danger? Or perhaps it would take a great deal more than this to make him feel truly at risk? Tanya let out a quiet sigh, thinking it must be the latter. “Why are you following me?”

“Because you’re poking around in my mark’s business. You stopped investigating her once before, so why did you start up again?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, but it is! If you’re not careful, the people around my mark will start to get suspicious of you, and you won’t be able to win against them. What do you want to do, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean a deal, of course. I’ve already thoroughly investigated her and reported back to my master. I’m keeping my eye on her right now, so if she makes a move, I’m supposed to take care of it first. In other words, if you’re lurking around, it causes problems for me. You have no

direct business with her. You just want to know her background and her motives, don't you?"

Tanya didn't answer. That didn't seem to bother the man, because he continued.

"If you just want to investigate her, there's no need to get too close. So I'll give you a hint."

"A hint? Not information?"

"I mean, I could give you the information directly, but then you wouldn't believe it. Correct?"

Tanya had to admit that he was right. "But if you give me a hint, what's in it for you?"

"Hm? I already told you. I don't want you poking around."

"Surely that can't be all." Tanya pushed her weapon closer.

Milo flashed her a sheepish smile. "No, no, it's the truth! Let's just say...part of it's because I'm rooting for your mistress a little."

"What...?"

"I'm—well, to be more precise, my master is—worried about her. For some reason, my mark holds quite the grudge against your mistress. The one who will suffer most because of it is this kingdom, although one might say it's getting its just deserts... At any rate, the root of the problem is the kingdom itself. But your mistress is different. My mark is the one who instigated all this, and ever since then, she's been harassing your mistress. And your mistress is the one who's paid the most for it."

It was abundantly clear that the man knew exactly who Tanya worked for. That only made her more cautious. Despite his happy-go-lucky tone of voice, she couldn't spot a single weak point in his defenses. She could tell that he was exceptionally good at what he did. If she had to fight him, the best she could hope for would be a draw.

"So you see, I'm worried about my master, who in turn is worried about your mistress. Speaking along the lines of alliances, I'm not on the enemy's side. Therefore, I don't mind giving you a hint. At a very reduced cost too. Especially since it has to do with your mistress."

If Tanya challenged him right here and right now, she had less than a fifty percent chance of beating him. She decided that, in that case, she should prioritize getting what she could and retreating. "Fine,

then. Go ahead and give me the hint.”

“Which would you prefer? The toughest information that requires the highest risk of death to attain or information that requires just, oh, an average amount of danger?”

“I want details on both.”

“Both, hm? Well, it’s true that it might be prudent to hear details about both options before you decide whether or not to investigate further.” He spoke in an almost patronizing way as he cautioned her, but she gave him a puzzled look.

“What are you talking about? Of course I’m going to investigate further.”

Milo’s eyes widened in surprise at that declaration, and he suddenly burst out laughing. “I *really* want you! I really, really want you to come work for us. Is that greed the secret of your success? That’s fine. I’ll respect your audacity and tell you both.” He kept smiling, and Tanya silently urged him to continue. “But first, do you need me to explain the House Rubens?”

Tanya didn’t respond to his question, because she had a feeling that if she said even one word, he’d take some other kind of information from her without her even realizing it.

“It’s written right on your face. You already looked into them, didn’t you?” Milo grinned at her again.

He was so incredibly inscrutable that Tanya felt a cold sweat dripping down her back. But she was careful to school her expression; it was possible that he was trying to trick her into something.

“I’m only joking. When you were investigating, I followed you to check your information. So, of course, I already know that you’ve looked into House Rubens. The hint I’m about to give you would be meaningless unless you already had that information. You’re just so stone-faced that I wanted to tease you. Seriously, though—will you stop with the expressionless act already?!”

Tanya whipped her weapon toward him. He not only dodged it by only a hair’s breadth, but he effortlessly grasped her weapon and threw it aside.



“How do you know it wasn’t laced with poison?” she asked.

“I’m resistant to most poisons. Plus, you’re clever, so you wouldn’t risk your life like that. You didn’t even throw it as hard as you could have, correct?”

Tanya couldn’t help but let a slight, wry chuckle escape her lips. Milo was right; she hadn’t used her full strength. She had only wanted to test her visual assessment of his ability; she certainly hadn’t thought that he would be able to grab her needle without even dodging.

“Anyway, putting that matter aside—I’ll give you a hint about the dangerous one first,” Milo said. “You need to look more carefully into Divan, and especially the recent activities of his Ayler Corporation. Then, once you take all of that into consideration, look into a certain baron. Ask yourself why he doesn’t stay in the capital, even during the social season.”

Tanya listened and silently nodded.

“And now the easy one. Dig around in her guardian’s family history, especially the first wife who died. Security isn’t tight around her information, so you should be able to find what you need easily.”

“All right. That’s enough.” Tanya lowered the second weapon she had taken out.

Milo smiled. “I’m glad you’re such a clever girl. I’d prefer not to fight in front of my master.”

“I’m sure. ...By the way, is your master in the kingdom right now?”

Milo’s smile deepened, but it didn’t reach his eyes. In fact, they glinted so sharply that they would have sent a chill down the spines of any who saw it. “I don’t think you need to know that.”

“Oh? I’d love a hint about that too, but it’s fine. I have no other business with you, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Mm. I’ll excuse myself as well.”

They both began walking at the same time, taking slow steps backward so as not to show their backs to each other.

After they’d put some distance between each other, they ran off in their respective separate directions.

Tanya headed back to the crowded main street. The instant she

arrived there, she suddenly felt exhausted, as though all the tension she had been carrying exploded at once. At the same time, she thought: *The first prince has an incredible pawn.*

That was, granted, only speculation on her part, but it was the most likely answer when she considered what Milo said about his master. Although it was still completely possible that everything he'd said was a lie. It might have all been the enemy's plan to confuse her. However, everything Milo said added up. The main keywords he mentioned—Divan and the Ayler Corporation—were both connected to Yuri. It would definitely be advantageous to focus not on the actions of Yuri herself but on the actions of those who worked in the shadows behind her.

The thing that stood out to Tanya most of all was that Milo had never once tried to attack her. He could've chosen to retreat the moment she sensed him, but instead, he followed her. It was almost like he'd wanted to have a conversation from the very start. But again, this was all speculation.

Tanya decided to reconsider Yuri's connections to Divan, but there was something she had to take care of first. She had to make the mission Iris had given her the number one priority. Although, not even Iris knew what that mission was. She probably never even could have imagined it.

Tanya was headed toward the Dunglely mansion, because Mimosa, Iris's friend, had invited her there. Even though she had left very early, she barely made it on time, thanks to her run-in with Milo.

The Dunglely mansion had quite a different air than that of House Armelia. A servant showed Tanya to Mimosa's private salon. "I'm terribly sorry for being late."

"Not at all. I apologize for inviting you here on such short notice. Go ahead and take a seat," Mimosa said.

"Oh, but I shouldn't..."

"I'm the one who asked you here. Besides, it's easier to speak to you that way. Please, sit down."

Tanya tried to defer, but if she said no again, it would have been rude, so she went ahead and sat down. "Why did you call me here?"

"Because you've gained Iris's trust."

Tanya was inwardly baffled by Mimosa's response.

"I heard a great deal about you while we were in school together," Mimosa went on. "About you, Dida, Lyle, and the others. I heard how you grew up with her, and she told me many stories that showed just how much she trusts you all. But you're the only woman in the group whom I've met, right? And since I'm an engaged woman, if I needed to speak with one of her servants, it would be unsightly to call one of the men over... And that's why I called you here."

It was clear that Mimosa was choosing her words very carefully.

"I have a favor to ask of you. Of all of you." The expression on her face was very serious. "If she tries to do anything because of me, I want you to stop her."

"What do you mean? Please excuse me for saying this, but I don't believe you're in a position to dismiss House Armelia's power." Tanya spoke simply because she knew she didn't have to bother beating around the bush.

Moreover, she wanted to understand Mimosa's motives. After all, she'd already been ordered to look into this engagement, and she'd finished doing so. She had learned, in essence, that Mimosa didn't truly wish to go through with this wedding. The man Mimosa had written to Iris about, the one whom she had wanted to marry, was someone else entirely. But before they could become engaged, Queen Ellia had interfered.

If they had already been betrothed, there might have been something to do about it, but it had been too difficult to turn down an offer from the queen when, at that moment, no one had officially proposed to Mimosa. Her sweetheart had an honorable reputation as a skilled knight, but his social status was otherwise meager. House Dungle and his family had been in no position to oppose the queen and House Marea. And so Mimosa had sorrowfully agreed to promise herself to the man Queen Ellia suggested for her.

If Iris found out, it was all too easy to imagine that she would try to take action. That was why Tanya had to know.

"I see... So House Armelia already knows." Mimosa smiled sadly. "In that case, I have all the more reason to beg for your help. Iris has a kind heart and a deep sense of responsibility. She might try to intervene. But she's already in a difficult position, and that would draw

even more attention to her. That's why I don't want her getting involved."

"You know my mistress well."

"We're friends, after all. Even though I spoke harshly to her, she's truly a precious friend to me. And that's why the very last thing I want is to stand in her way." Mimosa's voice was filled with determination. Tanya thought that she looked like a completely different person from the girl whose eyes had sparkled with delight while eating sweets at the Azuta Corporation's café. "I made up my mind from the beginning. I am a noble, and I will accept a marriage of convenience. It's simply realistic. So Tanya, if she makes a move, I want you to stop her."

"I'm merely a servant. Do you really think I can stop my mistress?"

"Yes, I do. Because she trusts you and the others."

Normally, servants didn't dare remonstrate with their masters. But Mimosa was certain they could do it. Iris had grown up with the orphans she saved, and she would never part ways with them easily. At the academy, she'd told Mimosa all about their relationships, built on that trust. But most of all, Mimosa had witnessed the truth of that for herself.

"Furthermore, it's within her best interests to do nothing. As you're so important to her...I'm sure you can stop her."

She has good instincts, Tanya thought to herself.

Truthfully, Tanya and her comrades made all of their decisions with Iris in mind. If something benefitted their mistress, they would endure anything in order to make it happen, no matter how difficult. Conversely, if something would bring her harm, they would do anything to cut it down. In all honesty, none of them really cared about Mimosa's situation. But if it was going to adversely affect their mistress, then they would do as Mimosa said and prevent Iris from getting involved. However...

"Forgive me for saying so, Lady Mimosa...but you're not the only one who values your friendship. Lady Iris has already put several people to work to ascertain the truth about your fiancé. She wants with all her heart to address the situation. It's true that we will do everything in our power to stop her from doing anything that isn't to her benefit, but ultimately, she is the one who decides what she will do. If she wants the

truth, it is our responsibility to put all our efforts into finding it. So unfortunately, I cannot make any promises to you.”

“I see... Your bonds with her are stronger than I thought they were.” Mimosa nodded, her expression conflicted.

I'd been swamped with invitations to visit various houses ever since I attended the royal ball, so I was doing my best to visit as many families as I could. But honestly, all I wanted was to return to Armelia. Regrettably, since both my parents were indisposed, I had no choice but to stay in the capital. Most importantly, the economy in Armelia was stable. Our only concern was if Queen Ellia's faction or Yuri made a move, and being in the capital put me in the most favorable position to deal with either of those events, should they occur.

The mood in the capital was one of disquiet. That impression grew stronger the more parties I attended. I could tell everyone was observing and assessing one another with utmost caution. I'd often described moving through the glitzy world of the aristocracy as walking into the lion's den, but lately it felt even worse than that.

However, the capital couldn't be the only focus of my attention. I had to look over reports and documents from Armelia, sign off on them, and give direction. Since I was so far away, it was important that I be highly detailed with my instructions in every matter.

Suddenly, I stopped writing. A thought had popped into my head: If I were to get married, I'd no longer be able to attend to this business. Acacia was a strictly patriarchal society. I definitely wouldn't be allowed to work. Not only that, but I would have to leave Armelia. I'd always pictured myself not getting married and staying in the duchy forever. I certainly never imagined I would marry a prince and move to another kingdom. The thought of it opened a hole in my heart.

Here, I was surrounded by Tanya and my other friends, and I had Dean by my side. I shouldered a great deal of responsibility and had faced many arduous obstacles, but the job was fulfilling in the extreme. I'd carried it out with everyone's support. I really had thought these days would last forever, even though I sometimes spoke of Berne taking over for me, once he had a family of his own. I had never dreamed it

would end in this fashion.

“We’re bluebloods. It’s our duty to carry on our family’s lineage and protect it. That’s why our mothers and grandmothers, and their mothers before them, married for political reasons. That is the responsibility of the nobility, isn’t it?”

Mimosa’s words echoed through my mind. She was horribly right. Every part of me, flesh and blood, existed for my family and the country. That was both the duty and pride of a noble. But...

“Dean...” The name slipped out of my mouth. I had an overwhelming desire to see him. At the same time, I didn’t. If I saw him and talked to him, I’d be able to forget this pain for at least a little while. Simultaneously, if I saw him, I would be racked with even more pain. I would be unable to give him up.

I knew there was no future with him, yet I still yearned for one. I wished for it. Mimosa was right; I wasn’t acting like a noble. I’d really let myself get carried away with these feelings, losing myself to these thoughts when I didn’t even know how he felt. Once I’d realized I was in love with him, I’d just kept falling, deeper and deeper. I thought I’d learned my lesson after Ed, but it was true what they said: danger past and God forgotten.

I put down my quill for the moment. I let out a deep sigh, trying to shake loose the dark thoughts swirling within me. I told myself that now was not the time for such ruminations and tried to calm down.

When I opened my eyes, I poured my full attention into the documents before me. Time went by quickly after that, and I was able to take care of everything I needed to for the day.

Now on break, I picked up the letter I had received from Moneda. It was regarding the matter I had asked him to check on for me, about the dramatic increase in the price of goods in the capital. I had instructed him to investigate the companies that were involved in the inflation. Tanya had thought it would take him a while, but such was Moneda. He still had incredible influence with numerous companies.

At that time, Tanya returned.

“My lady, may I give you my report?”

“Of course.”

She informed me of the events leading up to Mimosa’s

engagement. I was so shocked at the revelation that I was utterly speechless.

“My lady...?” Tanya looked concerned by my stunned expression.

“I’m fine. I’m fine, Tanya. Go ahead and continue.”

Still worried, she went on. “There’s one last thing. I have a message for you from Lady Mimosa.”

“You went to see her?”

“Yes, during my investigation.”

“I see. And what is the message?”

“Don’t intervene.’ She says she doesn’t want you to get involved.”

Tanya’s voice repeated in my head over and over again as I digested each word.

“That sounds like something she’d say.” I chuckled wryly, bringing the smile back to Tanya’s face. “She probably told you that if I make a move, you’re to stop me. Correct?”

Tanya bowed her head in confirmation.

“Honestly, she’s so foolish.”

That was all I could say in response to Mimosa’s considerate request of Tanya. I squeezed my eyes shut to stop the tears from coming. I let out a deep sigh, trying to release all the emotions pent up inside.

I wouldn’t have cared if Mimosa used me, but she was right; it wouldn’t be easy for me to make a move. The Armelian name carried power, but there were a number of barriers involved with that. If I took action in this situation, there was a danger that the fight for succession would intensify even more.

But if someone asked me if that were a good enough reason to abandon my friend, I would say no. She wasn’t someone I could just brush aside.

Back at the academy, after I had lost everything, Mimosa was the one person who had stuck by my side till the end. That was why she was important to me. If she hadn’t had my back, the rumors about me would’ve grown even worse. I cared for her just as much as she cared for me.

I closed my eyes and tried to sort through my thoughts. “Tanya, can I ask you to do me a favor?”

“Anything for you, my lady.”

“Thanks. In that case, I want you to deliver a message to Father Rafsimons. Under absolute secrecy, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll tell you the message after you finish your report. Please continue.”

Tanya merely stood there.

“You looked into everything I asked you to, correct? If not, then you would’ve said so in the beginning. Thank you so much.”

At this, a brilliant smile spread across her face. “I do not deserve such praise, my lady. I shall tell you everything I found out regarding Lady Yuri.”

I shifted my frame of mind and listened to Tanya.

“First of all, I looked into Divan and the Ayler Corporation again. He began his work in this kingdom several years before Yuri’s mother died. He covered his tracks so thoroughly that I was unable to find out specifics, but according to a servant girl of Lady Neuer, he visited Yuri several times. I have a hunch that these meetings occurred before Lord Neuer took Yuri in, back when she was a very young girl.”

“So it’s altogether possible that the man you mentioned after you investigated Yuri the first time—the one who came forward claiming to be a relative of Yuri’s—was Divan?”

“Yes, perhaps. And Yuri’s mother worked as a lady-in-waiting at the castle on the recommendation of House Rubens. More specifically, she was recommended by the duke’s late wife, the princess of Tweil who married into House Rubens.”

“And if we add that to the information my father gave me when he warned me to stop investigating Yuri, it’s very possible that she was a spy from Tweil...”

“Yes. Actually, someone else also came to this conclusion and found out the truth.”

“Someone other than my father or another high-ranking official from the kingdom?”

“Yes. Lady Neuer.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Even though Lady Neuer was a mere baroness, she had somehow acquired top secret information of the sort that only working politicians generally knew.

“As she grew apart from the man she loved, I’m sure she nursed a grudge against the woman responsible for that distance. Thus, she looked into her. The truth was too much for her to bear, and she made sure to prevent word from getting out. She removed Yuri’s mother from the castle under a veil of secrecy. That was probably when she demanded a pledge from Yuri’s mother.”

“I see. But Tanya...you tell me this as if you watched all of it happen.”

It was highly probable that this conclusion was the truth, but the last time Tanya investigated the matter, she had spoken as if everything was nothing more than an educated guess. She’d found a lot of circumstantial evidence, but nothing solid. If something had changed, then I wanted to know the source of her information.

“It was detailed in the late Lady Neuer’s cursed bo—I mean diary. Lord Neuer’s security is extremely lax, so I was able to read it quite easily.”

My cheek twitched when I heard Tanya almost call it a cursed book. The phrase “as she grew apart from the man she loved” sounded like something out of a tragic romance novel, so I had been honestly surprised when she said it. But it had probably come nearly verbatim from a line in the late baroness’s diary. I had a feeling that Tanya thought of it as a cursed book because it was filled with resentment toward Yuri’s mother, and both love and hate toward Baron Neuer.

“I’m sure everyone’s security seems lax from your perspective, Tanya. At any rate, why would she write such sensitive information in her diary? How utterly careless.”

“My lady, sometimes people just can’t keep certain things a secret.”

That felt oddly true. Now that I thought about it, this secret would be too heavy to hold solely within one’s heart. Maybe she had wanted to force out the feelings inside of her in an attempt to erase them, or perhaps they were so overwhelming and dark that she had simply been unable to keep them contained any longer. I’d experienced something

like that, so it wasn't hard to imagine.

"So in other words, it's confirmed that Yuri's mother was a spy from Tweil. And since Divan is an old friend of hers, he must have a connection to Tweil as well, and he's likely come to this kingdom for a specific purpose."

"Yes, that's what I think," Tanya agreed.

I let out a deep sigh. I wondered how many sighs like that I'd let out in a single day. Just thinking about it made my head hurt.

Yuri's mother was a spy from Tweil. Either Divan was too, or if he wasn't, he was still working for Tweil in some capacity. There was a cease-fire, but the war wasn't over; Tweil was still an enemy kingdom. Obviously, he hadn't come here just for a vacation.

Thinking of this connection gave me chills. Yuri was engaged to the second prince. She had furthermore shown herself to be a formidable foe, cutting down one powerful man after the other—and not just men. Now she had Queen Ellia under her thumb too. Sooner or later, she was going to leak every last one of our kingdom's secrets to the enemy.

No wonder I kept sighing. The faction headed by my father had kept this from happening for so long now, but my father was currently incapacitated. How long could they hold on without him?

"What has Divan been doing?"

"He's been making the rounds, visiting nobles aligned with House Marea. He's also buying up and selling food as the head of the Ayler Corporation."

"Who are the allies of House Marea who he's made contact with?"

"I made you a list." Tanya handed me a document. I scanned it quickly, then compared it to the letter I had received from Moneda.

"Looks like it's all connected." I was putting together a theory. Even though I had prayed I was wrong, there was no way I could deny it now. "Look at this, Tanya."

She examined the letter carefully. "This is the same list I gave you...but this is Moneda's handwriting. Did you have Moneda look into this too?"

"In a way. I had him look into a separate problem—the sudden

increase in the price of food. Moneda still has a deep connection to a number of related companies, so I asked him to look into it. It seems that the corporations who bought up the goods in question were middlemen who received orders, so I asked him who had placed those orders. Furthermore, the nobles aren't channeling their usual funds through their middlemen to buy up the grain. Instead, they're raising taxes to pay for the food. All the families involved are named on that list."

"In other words, Divan is buying all the food he can get his hands on."

"Yes. I think he's buying all the food each noble family has stockpiled. In order to compensate for that loss, they're in turn buying whatever foodstuff is put out for sale on the market. But the market can't possibly keep up with demand. There is only so much land cleared for crops to grow on, and until that increases, the amount of available goods is limited. It's impossible for everyone's stockpile to be replenished."

"Why is Divan buying up their stockpiles, though? Why doesn't he just buy from the market himself?"

"Probably because he's afraid of someone catching on. If he buys an extravagant amount of food on the market, then companies, the merchant guild, and eventually even the kingdom itself would notice and grow suspicious."

"But..."

"It's also cheaper for him to buy from the stockpiles than from the new harvest. And if he sweetens the deal a little, every noble family will be in his debt. Even though the families allied with House Marea are long-standing, prestigious houses, the truth is that many of them are in dire financial straits."

"I see..."

"But this is the number-one reason why." I handed her the single gold coin Moneda had enclosed in the letter.

"A gold coin? What's special about this?"

"It's no ordinary gold coin. I had Moneda look into it. There are impurities mixed into this one. It would take five of these to equal three genuine gold coins. But these are the kind that Divan's middleman

company used to pay off the nobles on this list.”

“Don’t tell me...”

“Anyone working for a decent company would spot it right away. And, apparently, the middleman company *did* think it suspicious but dismissed the possibility and accepted it anyway. Fortunately, the transaction itself wasn’t exceptionally large. Anyway, I’ve gotten off subject. The point is, I think that Divan is using these gold coins for payments.”

“So he’s obtaining the goods at a lower cost than their actual value?”

“That’s part of it, but that’s not all. Money is only valid because of trust.”

The history of currency in this world closely resembled its history in my previous life. What started out as a mere method by which to exchange goods evolved into an item everyone coveted unto itself, then something which could be accumulated and distributed, with a set value everyone agreed upon, as well as something that was easy to carry and store. In other words, currency had been invented by people.

Gold became the standard base currency, then convertible banknotes—in other words, pieces of paper that you could use to trade in for gold. After that, society moved to a managed currency system. In this world, they used gold as the standard for currency, just like in my previous world, and it had a set value, along with silver and copper. Notably, Armelian banks had recently introduced checks and promissory notes. But setting that matter aside, if everyone found out there were impurities mixed into the gold coins, *everyone* would start doubting if their gold was genuine. That would destabilize the worth of gold and the entire currency system based upon it.

For example, let’s say someone comes to you and asks to buy a loaf of bread. If they offered you a piece of gold produced by a well-known mint that guaranteed the authenticity of their currency, you would probably gladly accept that payment. But what if they handed you some kind of paper you’d never seen before and said you could trade in that paper for some gold? Would you do it? I wouldn’t. Because you’d have no idea if that paper was actually worth something or not. It’s the same sort of problem.

If a person can’t know if the payment someone is offering them is

genuine, of course they won't want to accept it.

"Divan, you lowly snake!" I snarled when I remembered seeing him at the Azuta Corporation in the capital. "Not only would the value of gold decrease, but the price of food would increase—and the food would already be scarce. Once people start fretting about it, there'll be a steep increase in food prices, one that no one will be able to stop."

I carried the weight of my citizens' livelihoods on my back. I couldn't let him succeed. For some reason, I was seething inside, swearing to myself that I would *not* let him win. When I'd faced off with Yuri's cronies before, I'd thought they were nothing more than a pain. But now that her people had taken things this far, they had ignited my fighting spirit. I was taking this attack personally, and I would not lose.

"First things first, I'll write a letter to Moneda."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell him to recover all the currency in circulation in Armelia starting immediately. We will be switching to a paper currency system."

"Paper currency?"

"Yes. Maybe I should call it a gold bond system? At any rate, this currency will be a piece of paper that you can exchange for gold coins. Fortunately, Moneda suggested we do this a while back. He said that since the paper won't be heavy like promissory notes, and it will be easy to carry around, it will be more convenient to adapt for general use. He brought me a prototype a bit ago. At the time, I thought that if only our domain adopted a paper currency, it would agitate the capital for no reason, so I told him to hold off on it."

I knew it would only fuel the rumors that we wished to become independent. The reason I'd been able to do so much until now was because Tasmeria gave its domain lords a great deal of freedom to do as we pleased, and what I did was well within the scope of that freedom. Moreover, I submitted all my plans to the capital, so they were aware of my activities. I also thoroughly discussed those submissions with Dean before submitting them to the capital. Of course, it helped that my father was the prime minister.

Frankly, it also helped that the battle for power was so intense at present, and as a result, the people in the capital were more worried about what was going on there instead of what was happening in every

domain. By the time they realized what I was doing, the plans had already been implemented in Armelia. I also heard that there were those who didn't interfere because they wanted me to fail.

At any rate, switching to a paper currency system would detach us from the kingdom's standard currency. I'd thought that I didn't have a real reason to go through with it, but as of now, the pros outweighed the cons. I needed to start right away, before confusion hit the market.

I was incredibly grateful for Moneda's efforts. He'd said this change was possible at any time; all we needed to do was to put the duchy officials on the case.

"The banks will collect all the gold, silver, and copper—after confirming their authenticity, of course. If we find any coins with impurities mixed into them, we shall only recognize them for their actual worth. Luckily, I don't think that many counterfeits have made it into general circulation."

"What about the gold coins we accept from other domains?"

"We'll check all of them for authenticity and accept them on a case by case basis. But we won't use any currency inside of Armelia but for paper. If anyone from another domain wants to do business with us, they must go to a bank to exchange their currency."

"How will the banks check the coins?"

"Moneda explained that the impure coins are much lighter than the genuine ones. So, they can weigh the coins and find out immediately."

"But my lady, won't switching to paper currency do exactly as you said and provoke the capital?"

"I'll alert Lord Sagitalia. As long as I go through him while he's still the minister of finance, no one will be able to stop me. Also, I'll make it clear that the paper currency can be exchanged for gold. In other words, I have no intention of trying to do away with the kingdom's standard currency. Although at some point, I won't be able to say that anymore. My number-one priority is protecting my own domain, so we need to proceed with this while people are still distracted by this game of succession musical chairs. Now, please call Sei in here."

Tanya immediately went to do so. Sei had come with us so that he

could observe the competition between businesses in the capital, as well as to check on the branch of the Azuta Corporation in the capital.

“What is it, my lady?” Sei entered the room slightly out of breath.

Tanya still had a cool look on her face, but this was no time to make jokes. I told him everything I’d told her, not hiding a bit of the truth. Once I was done, all the color had drained from Sei’s face. I was glad that he had immediately realized the gravity of the situation.

“The Azuta Corporation is doing a good deal of business in other domains now. What should we do about that?” he asked.

“The café in the capital doesn’t even really use gold coins, right?” I confirmed.

“Yes, that’s right. We use price setting in order to encourage commoners to patronize the café.”

“If someone does use a gold coin, make sure you have the customer wait a moment and weigh the coin in the back. If it’s lighter than a genuine gold coin, switch it with another gold coin and take it. If you don’t have any other gold coins, there’s nothing else to do but accept it. But make sure you store it in a separate place. I want you to keep count of all the coins you accept, including the lighter ones. Once you’ve accumulated more than ten of the lighter coins, calculate them against how many genuine coins you have and raise the prices of all goods sold there accordingly.”

“Yes, my lady. I’ll distribute scales to weigh the gold coins to every shop immediately. And I’ll have all the shops report back regarding the number and weight of coins they receive.”

“Yes, please do that. Oh, and raise the prices for the members-only shop—and on all luxury items in the other stores as well. Make me a list of all the items we can raise prices for and deliver it to me. We accept many gold coins, so check and make sure we don’t already have any counterfeits. And don’t tell anyone the reason, especially not when you explain it to the customers.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

After I rattled off my instructions, Sei bowed his head. The look of concern on his face had vanished. The tension was gone from his shoulders, and he had once more recovered his usual look of composure. That was exactly how he had been back in Armelia. After

he bowed, he left the room as quickly as he had come into it.

“Now I’ll have to give out various orders to Moneda and the other officials. Tanya, if you have anything else to report, please do so now.”

“I think that perhaps the first prince is aware of this matter.”

“Goodness. Why do you think so?”

“Because during the course of my investigation, I ran into another spy.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise at Tanya’s news as she told me of her encounter with the spy. Not only was I shocked that someone had been able to negotiate with Tanya, I was blown away that someone had made her feel as if she were in danger.

“You’re right... I think it’s highly possible that spy belongs to the first prince,” I said.

The first prince, Alfred, apparently had some exceptionally skilled people working for him. That boosted my opinion of him a bit.

“However, if he has such a brilliant spy doing reconnaissance, then he must also already have a plan to deal with the issue that he’s working on. At any rate, I’ll inform my father about the counterfeit gold coins, but I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Tanya looked slightly surprised.

I laughed, wondering why she was so bewildered. “Did you think I was just going to place blame and move toward a solution?” She nodded slightly in response. “Well, I won’t. I’m well aware of how much power I hold right now. Besides, my hands are already full with matters in the duchy. My first priority is the citizens of Armelia. I don’t have time to deal with anything else right now. Not to mention, no matter how hard I try to pull strings behind the scenes, right now Queen Ellia, House Marea, and their faction are running the capital.”

There was nothing to be done about it. Best-case scenario, they would crush me. Worst-case scenario, I’d be treated as a traitor.

“At any rate, I want you to investigate Lord Messi. Ah... Do you think that’s the reason why he’s barely in the capital, even during the social season? Apparently Lord Monroe has no room to take the extenuating circumstances into consideration. But if the first prince is aware of all this, I really can’t think of anything more encouraging for us.”

Tanya quietly nodded in response.

“All right, then. First, I must write a letter to the officials in Armelia, giving them instructions. Tanya, I want you to give Father Rafsimons a message.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Tell him to delay Mimosa’s wedding.”

“Ahh, I see...”

In order to marry in this kingdom, you needed the permission of the Darryl Church. It was most important to exchange your vows in front of God and have Her watch over you as you began your future together. One couldn’t do that without first securing the permission of the Church, of course. In other words, you couldn’t have a wedding ceremony until you received that acknowledgment.

“Queen Ellia might put pressure on him, but tell him that he must delay it, no matter what. He can decide how. Tell him nothing is off the table.”

It was only a short time ago that I had received a letter from him, rejoicing in how we’d removed Van as well as his father, the former pope, and all their followers at the same time. He’d said in the letter that he owed me one, and now it was time to call in the favor. Van had caused me no small amount of trouble, but if this was my reward, then I was glad I had taken him on.

“Very well, my lady. I will deliver the message.”

“Yes, please. And I want you to continue keeping an eye on the situation with Mimosa.”

“I understand.”

After Tanya left, I wrote letters to Sebastian and every official responsible for each jurisdiction back in Armelia. The letters to Abitante and Borsa were especially thick. I kept writing and writing, and before I knew it, the sun had set. But time was of the essence in this situation, so as I rested my eyes, I decided that if I had to, I would stay up all night to write the letters.

Just as I was thinking I should inform my guards so they could check our security, Lyle walked into the room.

“Lyle! Perfect timing. I was just thinking of calling you and Dida

in here.”

“I just ran into Tanya, and she told me to come in here,” he said. Once again, I was impressed with Tanya’s foresight. “What happened?”

In response to his question, I informed him of everything that was going on and also discussed my ideas regarding our security system going forward.

Lyle listened quietly before he spoke. “In that case, then we need to increase security at the banks, just as you said. Also, there should be security nearby when gold coins are changing hands and are being carried. I’ll give the orders right away.”

“That’s a good point. Let me know once things have taken shape. I need to let the other officials know as well.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“By the way, Lyle—I received a formal letter of apology from Knight Commander Sertreau.”

“Is that right? I’m sorry for the trouble,” he said with a wry smile.

It was unheard of for someone to turn down a direct request from the knight commander himself. The knighthood was regarded as an extremely honorable profession, after all. That was also why some of them became as conceited as Dorssen. But putting that aside, Knight Commander Sertreau’s attempt to recruit my bodyguards had gone too far—because they belonged to Armelia. Everyone knew that, so Sertreau’s decision to go through House Anderson as he stubbornly persisted in his attempts could be seen as a direct insult to Armelia.

In other words, Armelia absolutely couldn’t back down.

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, are you sure this is all right?” I asked. “If it’s really what you want, you know I would ultimately respect your wishes.”

“What are you talking about? My wish is to serve you, my lady.”

“I’m very grateful to hear that. But originally, you...”

“I am Lyle. I have no other name than that. And Lyle...has never even once considered leaving your side, my lady. Or...do you no longer have need of me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

I had told them all during our tussle with the Boltik family, but it

was worth reiterating—each one of my friends was incredibly precious to me. The only reason I'd come as far as I had was because of their help. But the main reason I valued them was because we had all been together since we were children.

"You're very important to me, Lyle. I would never feel like I didn't need you anymore. You all are like family. Actually...you're more than that."

I couldn't even imagine them betraying me. It was impossible. We had built up such trust with each other because we cared so deeply for one another.

"But that's exactly why I want you all to do what makes you happy."

"This isn't just because I made an oath to you, to dedicate my whole self to you." Lyle's tone of voice changed, and I gave him a puzzled look. "When I was a little boy, I made a vow not long after you took me in. You were like a shining beacon to me, my lady. Before I met you, I was only filled with wants and desires. But you made me want to give and serve. And so I swore to become a man strong enough to protect you."

"Lyle..."

"I have no other wishes but that."

"I see... All right, then. If you're certain of it, then I accept." I let out a sigh and smiled at him. "Good. Because I've been secretly worried about what I'd do if you came to me and said you wanted to leave me to go off and become a knight!"

Lyle chuckled. "Then why did you ask me?"

"Because you can't have any uncertainty in your heart going forward now. Just like when Dida asked if I was prepared for war."

Lyle nodded with understanding.

"But most of all, I don't want to tie you down. I'm grateful that you feel such loyalty to me because of the past, but I don't want it to narrow your options. I've said the same thing to Tanya."

"I would never say this to anyone but you, my lady. But if I could serve you for more than one lifetime, then I would do so."

"Goodness..." I had to laugh when I imagined it. "In that case,

Lyle, I'm glad you will be continuing in my service. I'll be counting on you."

"Of course."

After Lyle left, I looked back down at the papers in front of me. I'd finished writing my instructions to the duchy's officials, so it was time to send Sebastian my large-scale plan. I needed to include the news Lyle had given me and ask Sebastian to sort everything out.

Perhaps I need to give him a special vacation after all this is over?

I'd be working as hard as the people in Borsa for a while—actually, I was getting even less sleep than that.

I need to make sure I don't work him that hard, I thought as I hastily scribbled off my letter.

The sun at dawn was incredibly beautiful. I never got sick of seeing it every morning, even though at this point I'd lost track of how many mornings in a row I'd watched it rise.

Honestly, I hated being in the capital.

If only I were back in Armelia, I could give my instructions directly and if anything were to happen, I could deal with it immediately... But the capital was the eye of the storm, so by staying here, I was able to keep up with the developing situation in real time. That was why I had decided to stay, even though it pained me to do so.

Sebastian, Moneda, and the other officials were already carrying out the orders I'd written to them. Within days, their responses had arrived alongside reports, questions, and suggestions. I had answered the letters and included further instructions.

Tanya entered my study, a look of worry on her face. "My lady, you need to take a break at night. I know the situation is critical, but we'll be in even bigger trouble if you collapse from exhaustion. I'm begging you—please be in your bed in the morning when I come to wake you."

"I'll rest when all of this is taken care of. Do you have any news from Armelia?"

“There’s been no word yet.”

“I see. Well, we still have some time left. I’ll sleep for an hour. Come wake me then.”

“Yes, my lady.”

I went over to the cot and lay down. The simple bed stood out in my study, which was otherwise equipped with fine, sturdy furniture. I’d asked them to place it there because I didn’t want to even waste a few minutes by walking to my bedroom.

Tanya had a look on her face that said she was glad I was resting, but she really wished I’d get some sleep in a proper bed. Nevertheless, she promptly came to wake me after an hour had passed.

“Has any news arrived?”

“Nothing at the moment.”

“I see. Ah, by the way—did you receive any word from Father Rafsimons after you went to speak with him?”

“No, nothing there, either. I think he’s dealing with things in his own way, as usual.”

“Hm. Have you made any progress with your investigation into House Rubellia?”

“I’m terribly sorry, my lady. But nothing has come up in that regard yet, either.”

“I see. If only you could uncover some kind of major scandal or impropriety he’s engaged in to give Mimosa a good excuse to break off the engagement... Well, at any rate, go ahead and continue your investigation.”

It seemed like I’d have no choice but to plot against Count Rubellia. I had reserved that as a last resort, but either way, one must know their enemy before attacking, so our first order of business was the investigation.

Dan’s family name was among those on Moneda and Tanya’s lists, so it would certainly make things go faster if that scandal came to light and they were held accountable for their treasonous behavior.

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I’m going to get ready now.”

“All right.”

I was going to see Count Sagitalia. He'd sent a letter to the queen dowager in the form of an address to the royal family. I'd also explained the entire saga to my father, not sparing even one detail. After I was finished, he'd said, "I'm amazed you figured it out..." so I had a feeling he had already known about it. That was only a guess on my part though, because I hadn't had the chance to ask him any further details.

The reason why was because right after that, my father's condition worsened. He had come down with a flu. It was only a flu, but it was still a flu, all the same. I had a feeling that his immune system had weakened due to his injuries, which was why he caught it. He had a high fever, a racking cough, and I suspected he might be developing pneumonia as well. He barely had the energy to speak to me. But even though he was in his sickbed, he had instructed me to meet with Count Sagitalia, so that was what I was doing.

The moment I arrived, I told the count everything.

"And you figured all this out on your own?" he asked. "I would say I'm impressed, but I expect nothing less from you."

"No need for flattery. Anyway, I was wondering what measures you've been taking against the problem?"

"None."

"None at all?" I couldn't hide the suspicion from my face.

"I did send my most trusted employees to Prince Alfred, though."

"I see... So then Prince Alfred already knows about this situation?" I asked innocently, although I knew the answer to that question.

"Since it's you, Lady Iris, I shall be honest. But it was Prince Alfred who first uncovered this situation, not us. He is already working to address it. But he did say he feared that he wouldn't make it in time."

I had to say that I agreed with the prince's prediction. Too many of the counterfeit coins had already circulated. In other words, the fuse had already been lit. Now the only questions remaining were: How large would the explosion be, and how could we make it as small as possible?

"So then, why aren't you or my father—ah, never mind. I see. Because then the bottom would fall out, correct?"

The count nodded. "That's right. As you know, Lady Yuri is engaged to the second prince and has assumed the role of a future princess. In that position, she is seducing and deceiving the sons of nobles in this kingdom one by one. If we make even the slightest move and people get wind that counterfeit gold coins are in circulation, it will cause a great panic."

"I hate to compliment the enemy, but they've really done a number on us."

Count Sagitalia smiled weakly. "You're very much like your mother."

"Where did that come from, all of a sudden?"

"You haven't lost your fighting spirit, even in a situation like this. On the contrary, your eyes are blazing even more brightly now."

He had a point; even thinking about what Divan was doing made my heart feel like it was on fire. I was consumed with an overwhelming desire to win...and to bring about his downfall. The emotions were so strong, one could almost compare it to being in the throes of a passionate love affair.

"Putting that aside, as you have realized, the kingdom is in a most precarious situation right now. To further complicate things, Prince Alfred is currently out of the country."

"What did you say? What in the world is the first prince doing?"

"The queen dowager ordered him to leave. Just between you and me, the king doesn't have much time left. And that puts the second prince in an even more favorable position."

"Ah, I see. And if the first prince were here, the second prince's faction could crush the last bit of hope. So that was why the queen dowager wanted him to leave the kingdom for now."

"Her Majesty hasn't told me as much, but I think perhaps you're right. And I think her decision was solidified when Lord Louis was attacked."

"I see. As a citizen, however, I find that intolerable," I blurted out harshly.

The queen dowager's actions were as good as surrender—although I knew the situation had already grown hopeless.

“It seems that Prince Alfred was the first to find out, and when the queen dowager was made aware, she sent him to another kingdom. In my personal opinion, this is the prime opportunity to root out the evils of this kingdom. In order for the first prince to take the throne, he must completely overcome the second prince’s faction. Her Majesty ordered Prince Alfred to step away from the capital temporarily so they could take out the second prince’s faction just as they seemed to achieve victory. Of course, it’ll all be meaningless if the first prince doesn’t prove victorious himself, but I think it was necessary. ...Although, I don’t have any idea where he is right now. I think the only ones who do know are the queen dowager and Lord Louis.”

“My father?”

So he *did* know absolutely everything. I wished he’d told me. Then I could’ve started implementing the countermeasures in Armelia even sooner. Or perhaps my father had been afraid to let me make a move. There were certainly people who would grow suspicious if they had caught wind of what I was doing. And in the worst-case scenario, I might have ended up named as an accomplice to the first prince—a scapegoat for the second prince’s frustrations, as it were. However, being so afraid of that outcome that I didn’t make a move simply wasn’t an option for me.

I had no idea what would happen to Tasmeria, but as long as I could protect my own domain and my citizens, then I would not hesitate to take action.

“Thank you so much for telling me all this vital information,” I said. “You’ll be returning to your domain once the social season is over, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The fewer domains that descend into chaos, the better. I’ll be eagerly awaiting your letter in Armelia telling me of your success.”

“You’ve given me quite a bit of homework, once again.” There was a smile on the count’s face, but he was looking quite exhausted already.

Time passed very quickly after that. Thanks to everyone's tireless work, Armelia completely transitioned to using paper currency. There was a bit of confusion at first, but nothing beyond what I'd imagined. Sebastian said the transition went so smoothly because of the good relationship I'd built up with my citizens. Not to toot my own horn, but I think that's quite right. There was no way such a change would have gone as smoothly if I'd attempted it when I first rose to power.

However, many things had happened since then, and I'd overcome them all. I had taken my time to slowly implement various reforms and procedures. All of that had led to this. It made me feel like the road down which I'd walked meant something after all.

The Azuta Corporation had already raised its prices too. Other companies within Armelia were working on doing the same.

"Are you sure it's wise to tell the merchant guild about this?" Sei asked me after he was finished giving his report on the latest activities of the corporation.

"They're merchants. The finest merchants, in fact."

Sei looked surprised by my response.

"If chaos descends, it's highly possible that we won't be able to carry on business as usual. If people lose trust in gold coins, it's easy to imagine circulation stagnating. But these fellows are top-class merchants; they know it's in their best interest to keep their mouths shut and just weigh the gold coins to circumvent as much chaos as possible."

"I see..." Sei nodded, accepting my answer.

"I want you to continue managing the Azuta Corporation just as you always have. We've placed Armelian security guards at each one of the shops. And if you hear any new information, send it my way immediately."

"Yes, my lady."

Just then, Tanya entered the room. "My lady. I've just received word that the king has passed away."

For a moment, it felt like time froze.

So it's finally happened. I thought, and I sighed. "I see..."

"Did you already know?"

“No. But I was aware that he didn’t have much time left.”

“I see.”

“I’m sure Queen Ellia will make funeral arrangements right away to ensure that she can place Ed on the throne. Tanya?”

“Yes?”

“Start making preparations to return to the duchy. We’ll be going home as soon as the funeral ends.”

“But...”

“Things are already in motion. There’s no use staying here any longer. Besides, the longer I stay in the capital, the sooner they’ll find a way to attack me.”

“Very well. I’ll make sure we can leave at once.”

“Thank you. I need some time to think. Will you two leave for now?”

Sei and Tanya nodded, then left the room. As soon as the door closed, I let out a heavy sigh. I folded my arms on my desk and leaned forward, resting my head on them. We’d come to the point of no return. Queen Ellia and House Marea had their power.

What would happen to Tasmeria? And what would happen to Armelia? I knew the answer wouldn’t come even if I kept sitting there, thinking about it, but at the same time a vague unease grew within me.

I patted my clothes, searching for the pocket watch I wore around my neck.

I remembered the words I’d said to my father long ago: *“I will make our domain into one that cannot be shaken, no matter what happens in the capital.”*

“Did I speak the truth or not? The time to find out has finally come,” I murmured, hugging myself fiercely.

Don’t run. Don’t lose. Don’t give up. That’s what having responsibility means. That is the resolve I must have when I do this job.

That was a mantra of sorts I had repeated to myself in my past life whenever there was trouble at work. My experiences in this life had been so rich that I’d gradually stopped remembering things about my past, but that bit suddenly popped into my head.

“No matter what happens around me, I have to carry out the duty I was given.”

Because in the end, whatever events unfolded in the world didn't change my responsibilities. That thought was oddly comforting. Now calmer, I left my room to find my mother and Berne so that I could speak to them of the future.

Chapter 20: The Duke's Daughter Mourns

CHURCH BELLS TOLLED. Every feature of the royal capital was draped in black.

Just as I had suspected, the king's funeral service was held nigh immediately after his death was announced. It came so fast, in fact, that I had to wonder if they had planned it in advance.

Queen Ellia sprawled herself over the coffin as she shed tears. Other members of the royal family stood around her, including Yuri, despite the fact that she was *not* an official member of the royal family and merely a fiancée. Yuri stood there, gazing at the king's body, silently weeping, a concerned Ed close by her side. The queen dowager remained resolute, but there was a sadness in her eyes. The first prince was nowhere to be seen. Was he still abroad? Not even Tanya could suss out his movements, so they remained a mystery.

I stole glances from among the other mourners. Most of them wore melancholy expressions. Were they genuinely grieving over the king's death, were they pretending, or were they more worried over the fate of the kingdom?

I absently watched over the funeral as if from a place of great remove. As soon as it finished, I immediately departed the capital for Armelia. I'd already gone and alerted my mother and Berne to my plans the day I found out about the king's death, and I'd already said my goodbyes. My only concern was that my father's condition still hadn't improved.

Well, to be honest, I had many concerns. Mimosa, the future power struggle between the nobles, and so on. At the very least, there would be no developments with Mimosa's wedding because of the mandatory period of mourning following the king's death. Moreover, if something were to happen, I knew that Father Rafsimons would put a stop to it. As such, I decided to take advantage of this opportunity to continue my investigations and devise a plan while in Armelia.

As for the power struggle between the nobility, well, there was simply nothing I could do about it. If I stayed in the capital any longer,

Queen Ellia or Yuri would find a way to destroy me. I had no choice but to take my leave.

My servants greeted me as usual when I arrived at the estate.

“Welcome home, my lady,” Sebastian said on behalf of the rest.

“It’s good to be back.” I looked over everyone’s faces, said my hellos, and then went inside. “Sebastian, tell me everything that’s happened since my departure. And gather reports from the heads of both Borsa and Abitante. Also, I want you to contact Moneda. Tell him I want to know what he’s been up to since I’ve been gone, and I want to discuss our future plans with him.”

I shot off my instructions in rapid fire while Sebastian listened attentively.

“Dida, I’m sorry to ask you this just after we get home, but please gather reports from the security force and bring them to me. I especially want to know if there have been any problems with the guards at the bank, and I want to know the state of order in each city after converting to paper currency.”

“You got it, Princess.”

“Lyle, I want you to check if there have been any issues with personnel, goods, and facilities in each district. Right now, it’s urgent that we assess security everywhere, for the future of the kingdom. I don’t want to hear that we weren’t prepared when it’s too late.”

“Yes, my lady.”

I gave out the orders as I walked through the house, until I had reached my study. The instant I sat down, Sebastian entered the room with several reports. In the days following, he left reports like this every morning to inform me of what had happened during my absence. I was grateful that he did it in this way rather than telling me everything all at once. I started reading the ones he provided upon my arrival so I could go to my various meetings armed with the relevant information. When I read them, I sorted the matters covered into ones that urgently needed to be taken care of and those that could wait.

Just then, Sebastian came back into the room. I asked him several questions and checked details with him regarding the reports I’d read. His job was to gather reports from each agency and official and put them in order. In other words, I was able to get a more complete picture

from talking to him. I wasn't sure if it was because of his long-standing experience as a butler or simply his personality, but he was extremely skilled at arranging things in a coherent fashion. Additionally, as he could smoothly carry out all my orders in each area, I always felt comfortable leaving things in his care.

"It seems as though there aren't any other pressing problems besides the currency situation, hm?"

"That's correct. Besides the urgent matter you wrote about from the capital, everything else is proceeding smoothly. There haven't been any tangles in particular that need attention. The only item of note is that quite a lot of personnel were required during the switch to paper currency."

"Right. Still, we can't draw this out for too long. I'm sorry, but this situation will continue until things calm down. It might be a bit early for the students' work study, but perhaps I'll start recruiting them." Ever since my excommunication, I'd been temporarily hiring students to perform part-time jobs every now and then. It was an exceptional experience for them.

"I think that's a good idea."

"We can't have everyone collapsing from overwork, after all. However, we can't have them directly handling the exchanges either. Make sure that's carried out appropriately."

"Yes, my lady."

I let out a sigh. "Still, I'm so glad that we were able to transition to the paper currency system so quickly."

"Yes, I'm sure it's because Moneda made preparations for it in advance. His overenthusiasm served us well."

"Ha ha ha. Instead of chastising him for going ahead without permission, I'll have to thank him!"

It had been quite a surprise to find out that he had already made more than enough paper currency even before I gave him the orders to commence the switch—even before he knew whether I would approve.

"Well, at any rate, that's just another reason why he needs a break."

Moneda was the kind of man who thought and acted for himself. The same could be said for Tanya and the others, but Moneda was

different. The others always tried to think of the best ways to help me before they made a move, but Moneda cleaved to his own convictions, and in the most efficient way possible. That was why he was willing to risk butting heads with me. There was no one else I would've trusted more to implement an independent banking system.

"There was a short period of confusion within the duchy, but it calmed down once the major companies exchanged their gold coins and adopted the paper currency."

"That's true. Thanks for your reports. Can you have the heads of Borsa and Abitante come here? And prepare the conference room—I want to have a meeting there."

"Yes, my lady."

The following days and months were turbulent, to say the least. There wasn't much disorder in the capital after the king's passing, not that this surprised me. He had been indisposed for a long time, so not much had changed for those who worked under him.

However, the increase in Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea's arrogance was reportedly nearly unbearable to witness. People in key positions of power who belonged to Prince Alfred's camp quit one after another and withdrew to their domains. Count Sagitalia was one of them, of course.

My father remained in the capital due to his condition, but he also resigned from his post. He wanted to step down before someone made up a reason to force him out. Those close to Marquis Marea were quickly dubbed the successors to my father's position and everyone else's, almost as if they had been waiting for the chance.

This kingdom rotted away more and more by the day. It was in definitive decline. And preparations were already underway for Ed to ascend as the next king.

All those thoughts ran through my head as I looked down at the documents in front of me. Fortunately, no one had yet made any moves against Armelia. I wondered when they would start. For now, I could focus on reading the reports on our infrastructure improvements. I tried

to push the dark thoughts out of my head and pay attention to the documents again. I was genuinely pleased to see my ideas had finally come to fruition.

Once things calm down, I would love to go see the construction in progress, I thought.

Just then, I remembered something Rehme had said: *“It’s common in this kingdom to see several months of hot weather followed by long periods of heavy rain, especially in the western regions, maybe once every hundred years or so. It’s never affected Armelia, so it’s generally none of our concern, but I thought I ought to let you know.”*

How could I have forgotten this?

“Tanya!” I yelled in a voice much too loud for addressing my lady-in-waiting—or anyone, for that matter.

“My lady! There’s something I need to tell you...!”

But Tanya burst into the room at that exact moment.

“What is it?”

“There’s been a flood. It’s a disaster. The western part of Tasmeria, including Lord Monroe’s domain, has been overwhelmed by a flooded river. They’ve incurred serious damages.”

I’m too late, I thought as I clenched my hands into fists. You stupid idiot! Rehme told you and everything!

This would be the trigger. The grain belt in our kingdom began with Count Monroe’s domain in the west. The flooding had no doubt destroyed many crops before they could be harvested. The amount of food on the market would soon sharply decrease, and many domains had barely any stockpiles left, because their governors had sold off even the last scrap of their reserves to Divan.

The kingdom would fall into absolute chaos.

“Tanya! Assess the duchy’s stockpiles right away! And bring me the Abitante census documents from each region, even if it’s just a general idea. Also, I need to meet with the head of the merchant guild. Contact him immediately. Have Sei check on the welfare of the Azuta Corporation employees in the affected areas. You can even send my family’s personal security if you need to.”

“Yes, my lady.”

First off, we needed to regulate exports of food from Armelia. That was what I needed to discuss with the head of the merchant guild. Then, I needed to find out what had happened to the branches of the Azuta Corporation branches in the affected areas. I made a mental checklist in my head, and I was already developing a bit of a headache. But I couldn't rest.

"Someone call Lyle and Dida in here!"

Several people in the mansion started scurrying about—the urgency in my voice must have been apparent.

"What is it, Princess?"

"What's wrong, my lady?"

Both of them ran up to me, looking worried. Tanya entered the room at the same time, documents in hand, likely regarding our stockpiles.

"Thank you, Tanya." I held out my hand, and she handed me the documents right away. As I took them, I explained the situation to my two bodyguards. Then I told them how Divan's machinations would affect things going forward.

"We might receive an influx of refugees wanting to move to Armelia. But our food reserves and land aren't unlimited. So we need to strengthen the borders."

"Yes, my lady."

"I want you three to know that I trust you from the bottom of my heart, and that's why I'm saying this." For a moment, I hesitated to say what I was going to tell them. But I had to. "I'm going to take a portion of our stockpile—an amount that would feed the Armelian population for three months—and bury it."

"Bury it, my lady?" They looked confused.

"That's just a figure of speech, of course. I'm going to store it in a different place—some other location, separate from the rest of the stockpiles. Somewhere here, on our land. And I'll rewrite the ledger, just in case."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because the kingdom might come to us for help, and as long as I'm the governor, there's no telling what unreasonable demands they

may make. They might even come to survey the handover. That's why we need to be ready."

"I see..."

"I'm just thinking in terms of the worst-case scenario." I murmured self-deprecatingly. I didn't think they heard me say it. "Well. Let's begin."

I gave detailed instructions to each of them, and they all sprang into action. As I watched them leave, I let out another wry chuckle.

Don't think about anything else. You're not God, after all.

I was merely a human. And because I was a human, I had to choose. I had to choose to protect those close to me over those far away calling for help. That's what I thought in order to placate my anxieties, borne of my weakness.

Don't run. Don't lose. Don't give up. Take responsibility for your decisions.

I repeated those words to myself before I returned my attention to the documents on my desk.

Berne departed from the capital on his way to Count Monroe's domain. He had been dismissed from his post the moment his father, Louis, resigned from his. He now had so much free time on his hands, it felt like his previously packed schedules were no more than a dream.

Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea brandished their power with impunity back in the capital. The queen dowager had once again been forced to retire from public life when she was made to take responsibility for the food crisis; the queen had declared that the queen dowager's countermeasures had not been woefully sufficient. The marquis went on to declare that the kingdom could no longer cling to old traditions and that what they truly needed to overcome these difficulties was a new king, one who could guide the kingdom in a new direction.

Any excuse would have been good enough for them to say as much, but this crisis had fallen into their laps. The capital was on a path

to unrest. Food was essential for human survival, yet there wasn't enough. People raced to buy up what little was left and stockpile it for themselves. They couldn't be blamed for it; everyone feared the future. Moreover, rumors had begun to spread that there were counterfeit gold coins in circulation, which only inspired further panic in the citizens.

Prices had skyrocketed to unbelievable highs and the streets were filled with starving people. The royal family made earnest attempts to deal with the issue, but since they had already given up so much of their own personal stockpiles to charity, even the food reserved for the royal family had nearly disappeared. As such, the capital had fallen into disarray.

Some people bemoaned the situation and wept over it; some were angry. Those tears and anger swirled together into one great hurricane that consumed the capital. Little squabbles grew into fights, which resulted in even more tears. Everyone had their hands full taking care of themselves. And their discontent with the nobles, who barely paid attention to the suffering of the people and whose lives had barely changed, grew ever more intense.

Berne was on his way to see Count Monroe because his father had instructed him to do so. Louis had given the order to his son the moment he was able to get out of bed. If Berne had the time, he said, then his father wanted him to go see Count Monroe's domain, since it was on the border of the kingdom. He wanted to know the state of affairs in that region, since this was a prime time for Tweil to attack. Not to mention, he wanted to know how the nobles in that land were faring.

Berne was a bit puzzled by that last bit, yet he was going nevertheless. On his way there, he listened to the citizens. Every single one of them expressed anxiety and discontent.

"I heard everything's fine in Armelia."

"No way. They have to be affected too, if things are this bad."

"But it's true. People have heard it, and there's a line out the door of folks wanting to move there."

"I wonder how long it takes to get to Armelia, though? I got a kid who's not even two yet."

Berne heard such conversations several times. Word of Armelia's prosperity had traveled even to the farthest regions. Every time Berne

overheard these conversations, his respect for Iris grew even deeper, but they also filled him with worry. He feared what kind of demands Queen Ellia would place on Iris once she heard of Armelia's health. Once again, Berne cursed his own powerlessness. It was a vicious cycle.

At any rate, he and his three bodyguards hurried to Count Monroe's domain. They took short rests along the way, but they traveled with great haste. At last, they arrived. The moment they did, Berne was rendered both speechless and expressionless.

To call it a ghost town would have been insufficient. The main avenue looked like a street in the capital's slums. The flood waters had just receded, leaving behind a horrible mess on the roads. People were lying on the street, so emaciated that they were no more than skin and bones. Berne couldn't tell if some of them were even alive. The stench of rot invaded his nostrils.

"What...is this?" he blurted out.

There was no answer. He impulsively started running.

"Lord Berne! Please wait!"

He didn't even hear the guard's voice.

This can't be real, he thought as he ran. But no matter how far he went, the scene was all the same—or to be more truthful, it grew even worse. If hell existed, this was what it looked like. Hopelessness seized his heart.

"Are you...a noble?" a woman asked him, staring absently into space. "Please, have mercy on me...I've had naught but muddy water to drink for three days." She staggered as she came closer to him. She was emaciated, and her eyes were vacant, lifeless and empty. The sight of them sent a shiver down his spine.

"Get away from him!" Another man pushed the woman out of the way and clung to Berne instead. "Have mercy on *me*! I'll do anything. I'll be your slave if only you'd bring me some food!"

More people came toward Berne, pushing the others out of the way and grabbing on to him.

The first woman who had approached him was still on the ground. Her body twitched, then stopped moving. A man stepped on her as if she were nothing and reached out toward Berne.

"A-agh!" Berne grabbed his head and screamed, trying to banish

this scene from his mind.

Two of his bodyguards heard his wail and rushed to his side.

“Back away from him!”

Berne snapped back to reality when he saw his guards draw their swords. “Don’t hurt them!” he demanded. The guards hesitated.

“But Lord Berne!”

“It’s fine! You want food, don’t you?” Berne saw light glimmer in the people’s eyes. “Fons!”

Fons, one of his guards, looked even more bewildered. “Lord Berne!”

“Do as I say. Throw it as far as you can!”

The guard took the pack from his back and tossed it far away.

“That package contains all the food we have.”

The instant those words left Berne’s mouth, the people all scrambled toward it. Berne and his guards dashed in the opposite direction. They ran all the way to the border, then after they checked to make sure no one had followed them, all three sat down.

“I’m sorry I went off without saying anything.”

“We’re just glad you’re safe. Are you sure it was a good idea to give up the food?”

“We can survive a day without. I have some emergency rations in my ruck, so the four of us can split them. I’m sorry you had to come here with me.”

“It’s fine. But that...” The guards’ expressions darkened all at once. They’d seen the same hellish scene as Berne. They were bewildered...and afraid.

“I think the main problem is the matter at hand, but that’s not all,” Berne murmured calmly. “I have a feeling those people were starving even before the floods. I think that perhaps it’s Lord Monroe’s fault that the food is so scarce.”

“Surely not!”

“Are people’s lives so wholly dependent on who has power over them?” Berne bit his lip.

His guards gasped, having realized he wasn’t calm at all. In truth,

Berne was unbelievably angry, though his anger was mostly directed toward his own powerlessness. The rage in the air was palpable.

Just then, they heard a rustling in the brush. His guards sprang to their feet to protect him. But nothing appeared. His guards drew their swords and slowly approached the brush, which they parted cautiously.

“Wh-what...?” one of his guards exclaimed.

“What happened?”

“It’s a child! A child has collapsed here!”

Berne immediately sprang to action. The guard was right; a young, extremely thin girl was passed out in the brush.

“We have water with the horses, don’t we?”

“Yes. Morry is standing guard with them.”

“Then go back to Morry and bring the water!” Berne picked up the girl and gave orders to his guards, who stood stiff behind him. The girl was surprisingly light. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes opened weakly when Berne talked to her, but they were unfocused.

“Hey...hey!” Berne called to her urgently, but she did not answer. She opened her mouth slightly, but all that came out was a silent breath.

“We brought it!”

“Here’s water! And food!” Berne held the food up to her mouth, but the girl didn’t move. He withdrew his emergency rations from his pocket and sprinkled water on them, then took the mushy food into his mouth. Once he had chewed it, he pressed his mouth to the girl’s. Berne’s guards were shocked, and they moved forward to stop him, but they paused when they saw the frantic fear in their master.

The little girl did not swallow the food. She lacked the strength to do even this.

“Please... Please, eat it!”

Berne’s cries were in vain, because the girl stopped breathing.

“Hey... hey!” Berne shook her.

There was no answer.

“Lord Berne, she’s already...”

“Why? Why did such a little girl have to die like this?!” Berne snarled. His violent emotions turned into tears that flowed from his eyes. “Why did she have to suffer, when the men governing this domain are fat and happy...?”

He could no longer speak. He just let out an anguished groan as he held the girl tightly in his arms, as if trying to catch her life in his hands, begging her not to go.

He stayed there in this manner for the entire night, holding the girl as she grew cold in his arms.

One of his guards spoke to him tentatively when the morning sun rose. “Lord Berne...”

Berne reacted to his voice, turning vacant eyes toward him. Up until that moment, he had not responded to any of them, but now, he finally reacted.

“We must return, Lord Berne...”

“I’ll leave once I bury her,” he said, sitting up. Berne quietly dug a hole and buried the girl in it, then prayed over her grave. Once he was finished praying, he opened his eyes. They were filled with resolve. He took out the dagger he kept on him and sliced off his braid with the blade.



“Lord Berne...!” One of his guards exclaimed in shock.

Berne turned back toward them, his gaze hard and cold.

His shorn locks fluttered in the wind. “The man I was yesterday died along with that little girl,” he murmured and turned on his heel. He was headed back toward the capital.

Berne was eerily silent during the trip home, and they moved quickly. All he and his guards thought of was hurrying, ever forward. As soon as they arrived in the capital, Berne went straight to the mansion to see his father.

“My...your face has changed, Berne.” Both Louis and Merellis looked shocked to see the change in their son. The light in his eyes seemed sharp enough to cut flesh, and his face was noticeably thinner. “What did you see?”

“I saw hell on earth,” Berne answered his father quietly, but fire burned in his eyes.

Louis let out a sigh. “Take this to the detached palace.”

Berne gave him a puzzled look.

“You’ve become painfully aware of your own powerlessness, have you not? And you wish you could do something from the bottom of your heart? Something that could change the kingdom?”

“Yes,” Berne answered without hesitation.

“Then hurry.”

Berne took the papers from his father and swiftly left the mansion.

The other domains were falling into disarray, and even Armelia was beginning to feel the aftershocks. An endless stream of people wanted to move to the duchy. I asked to see the situation for myself, and despite everyone’s objections, traveled to the border. I was left speechless.

“Please, let us into Armelia!”

“Please, have mercy! I walked all the way here with only water and nothing to eat!”

“Please, at least help my children! I don’t care what happens to me as long as my children are taken care of!”

“Don’t cut the line!”

Piercing screams came from all directions. The people looked haggard, frantically wailing at the top of their lungs. I desperately resisted the urge to cover my ears.

I hadn’t slept much since that sight. Every time I tried, I heard the people’s screams ringing in my ears. Each time that happened, I went to my desk, telling myself: *Don’t run. Don’t lose. Don’t give up.* I sent off orders to let in as many refugees into Armelia as we could afford to without inciting disorder within our borders.

I also had to deal with the Azuta Corporation. Fortunately, we had suffered no personnel losses due to the flooding, but we couldn’t begin to think of reopening those stores amidst such turmoil. I had no choice but to temporarily close all the shops that sold food in other domains. It pained me to do so, but there was nothing else I could do. Those employees were now out of work, but I had a responsibility to provide for their basic needs, so I was also dealing with that as well.

I’d heard that lately the Armelia estate was being called “the castle that never sleeps.” The other Armelian officials were working hard for me as well, despite their own troubles. How often were they even able to go home? When I asked one of them, he laughed.

“I’m not sure... I haven’t been keeping track. The last time I tried going home, my wife yelled at me. She said, ‘Don’t worry about us when Lady Iris needs you! She’s desperately trying to protect us all!’ Then she told me to get to sleep and go right back to work.”

On hearing this, the other officials in the room laughed and agreed; they’d had similar experiences. Even though I’d never met most of their families, I felt deeply grateful to them for that. At the same time, it encouraged me.

At some point, I stopped bothering to cover the dark circles under my eyes with makeup. I didn’t remember when. But I also no longer cared.

Don’t run from reality. Don’t lose to yourself. Don’t give up on your responsibilities. I told myself this as I sat at my desk, surrounded by stacks of papers. Everyone trusted me, and so they followed me. The kingdom was in turmoil, and the ones who suffered the most for that

were the citizens. I couldn't stand for this senseless reality.

The lives of those citizens, and the future citizens who waited at our gates, whose last hope was Armelia, depended on every paper I signed and every order I gave. I had no time to rest.

"My lady..." Sebastian called to me in an apologetic voice. I had a feeling that something bad had happened again. "This letter just came from the capital..."

I took the letter from him and read it. While I did so, my hand clenched the paper. When I finished reading, I tore the letter up in frustration and threw it away.

"What is the meaning of this?!" I snarled angrily. A maid who was standing in wait in the corner of the room flinched, looking frightened. "Ahh, I'm sorry. You can leave now."

The maid hurried out of the room. Seeing her leave so swiftly cooled my anger.

"Yet another demand for food!" I snapped. "How many times are they going to ask? And on top of all that, 'Refusing to supply aid will be seen as insurrection'?! Just who do they think they are?!"

To paraphrase the letter, it read: "You've got a lot of food stored up, right? Well, give it to us, because the kingdom is going to use it. And if you refuse, you'll be considered a traitor, and we'll send troops to take it by force." The phrasing was more polite than that, but the gist was the same.

"We've sent them food *three* times now! If we send any more, we'll have our own shortages!" I raised my voice, but Sebastian didn't blame me for it. We'd set aside our secret stockpiles, but we'd already sent more than half our other food to the capital. That was about as much as the entire output of a smaller domain. And every time afterward, we'd receive another threatening letter, leaving us with no choice but to send more.

They'd only sent one such letter to my uncle and aunt of House Anderson.

So basically, they were just harassing me.

"We cannot possibly send any more. If we do, then our people will begin to starve here too."

Sebastian didn't know about the secret stockpiles, so the color had

drained from his face as I said this.

“That’s right,” I shook my head. “We have no other choice but to decline.”

“But my lady...”

“I can’t help it if we don’t have anything else to send. And even if we did send something, they’d just keep asking for more and more.”

I attached a record showing our stockpiles were low and wrote a letter saying that we had no more to send, then handed it to Sebastian.

“I’m going to write a letter to my grandfather and uncle as well. Just in case something happens, I don’t want to make an enemy out of their domain, seeing as they border us.”

Sebastian nodded, a tense look on his face.

“I want you to call the officials from Borsa here. We need to increase our budgets and also increase purchases of foodstuffs from other kingdoms.”

“Of course. I’ll take care of it right away.”

I was afraid of what response might come. The only saving grace was that Mimosa’s wedding had been further delayed because of the troubles across the kingdom. While Father Rafsimons had put a stop to it on his end, neither family could spare the resources at the moment.

Deep in thought, I stared at the potted bugle resting on my windowsill. It seemed like a very long time since I’d bought it.

I smacked myself across the cheek. This was no time to be getting sentimental.

And so, once again, I immersed myself in my work. A few days later, another letter arrived from the capital, sooner than I expected. I hesitantly broke the seal and opened the envelope.

“Well?”

“It basically says ‘Enough with the impertinence and send us the food. We don’t have unlimited resources.’”

The end of the letter said that this would be our final warning. If we refused, they would send the military. I wanted to scream, “*What are you, loan sharks come to collect your debts?!*” But I supposed that would have been lowbrow of me.

“I’m going to the capital,” I said. “I heard that Queen Ellia and the other nobles are gathering to have a meeting anyway.”

“Now? In this situation?”

I couldn’t blame Sebastian for being suspicious. Why would the families be holding a meeting when we were in such dire straits?

“I have a feeling it’s because Ed’s position has been settled. It’s probably just a show, so that they can officially demonstrate that he will be ascending to the throne.”

“But my lady...”

“Unless I do something, they’ll just continue trying to squeeze us dry. And even when we truly cannot afford to give anymore, they’ll continue harassing us. I don’t see any other future. Once we got to that point, it would be too late. I absolutely will not accept that future for Armelia.”

“Yes...”

“There is one thing I’m worried about. Will you be able to take care of things here?”

“You’ve already put the plans and countermeasures in place, my lady. Not to mention, I have so many dependable officials I can count on for help.”

“So...?”

“Yes, my lady. Go to battle free of fear.”

“Thank you. I’m entrusting Armelia to you.”

“I understand. Please be careful on your journey.”

I ordered Tanya to make the preparations, and once again, we set out for the capital. Time was of the essence, so I took as few people as possible.

On the way there, I reminisced about my brush with excommunication. Dean had saved me then, but not just then...he’d saved me many times over. However, Dean wasn’t here now. I hoped he was safe during all this turmoil. I tried to push the worst-case scenarios out of my head. At present, I had no way of knowing how he was doing. That unfortunately made me worry all the more. It made my heart ache.

Still, I had no time for concerns such as these, so I tried to push them to the back of my mind. But every now and then, a glimpse of

them resurfaced. When my anxiety felt like it was too great to bear, I took out the pocket watch and clutched it in my hand.

I would have dropped everything and rushed out to search for him if I had been the least able to. But I couldn't. It was out of the question. All I could do was wait for Dean to return. If I dropped everything for him, I would never forgive myself. I clutched my pocket watch, trying to push down these fears.

When I arrived back at the capital, the changes I beheld took my breath away. Had it always looked so desolate...?

Lyle and Dida glanced around cautiously. They clearly sensed more danger here than on the road, and I could sense the rising tension in their posture. Nevertheless, we kept going and arrived at my family's mansion.

I was relieved to lay eyes on familiar faces and promptly went to announce my arrival to my father.

"It's so good to see you again, Father. I'm pleased that you look much better than when I last saw you."

"It has been quite a while, Iris. I've recovered well, thanks to Merellis and the others." My father had a smile on his face, but it struck me as weak. He was visibly thinner than the last time I saw him. It still seemed like it was painful for him to sit up. However, his complexion was much improved.

"It's nice to see you again, Mother."

"And you as well. I hear you've been working very hard."

"Well, I'm trying," I demurred shyly at my mother's kind words.

"Iris, I heard what's going on." But my father quickly snapped me back to reality.

"I'm sorry, Father. It's all my fault that I've caused so much trouble for the family."

"What are you talking about? I've never regretted making you governor, not for a single moment. Besides, even if you weren't in a position of power, House Armelia has always stood in House Marea's way. They would have tried to overthrow us sooner or later regardless."

"That's right, Iris. Please stop speaking as if you're not needed. You're so precious to us, and to the citizens of Armelia."

“Mother, Father...”

“We hope you realize that. We—and all your citizens—trust your judgment.”

“Thank you.” My eyes burned with tears. How did my parents always know how to say exactly what I needed to hear?

“It pains me that I can’t take action alongside you, Iris,” my father murmured guiltily.

I shook my head. “It’s fine, Father. Your sentiment alone is more than enough.”

My conversation with my parents filled my heart with warmth. They trusted me explicitly, and they validated me. I couldn’t think of anything more encouraging than that.

“Please go lie down, Father. I’m going to rest for a bit too, so if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, I went back to my room.

A few moments later, Tanya entered. “Pardon me, my lady.”

“What’s happened?”

“The investigation is finished, thanks to Moneda’s cooperation. We have the full support of the Andersons, including your grandfather.”

“I see. We can rest easy if worse comes to worse. Tanya, were you able to contact Milo?” She nodded silently. “And what did he say regarding Queen Ellia’s summons?”

“He was all smoke and mirrors, but he basically said this: ‘She’s not the kind to pick a losing battle.’ By which he meant to refer to you, of course.”

“I see...”

Tanya’s answer gave me a sense of reassurance so strong that it felt as if Dean were by my side.

“Maybe it’s just my imagination...” I placed a hand over my heart. Beneath it, I could feel the pocket watch that I wore around my neck.

“What’s the matter, my lady?”

“It’s nothing. Go ahead and distribute the other letters to those I’m going to negotiate with. I’ll be taking action.”

“Very well, my lady. I’ll let you know their responses as soon as I

can.”

“All right. Thank you, Tanya.”

As soon as Lyle arrived in the capital and escorted Iris to her parents’ mansion, he headed for the castle. Dida was by his side, as usual. But he hadn’t said a word. This was on account of Lyle’s expression, which looked unusually sinister. Not even Dida had ever seen Lyle look so severe. It wasn’t cold, per se. It was more that his typical upstanding and noble demeanor had vanished.

A servant by the entrance to the castle showed them inside and led them to a room, where Yuri waited for them.

“I knew you’d come, Lyle. Although there’s someone I didn’t ask for here with you.” Yuri’s eyes sparkled as soon as she saw Lyle, but her expression changed into a pout when she noticed Dida next to him.

“Why does it matter if he’s here too?”

“It doesn’t, as long as it’s all right with you.” Yuri’s mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile.

Dida was dizzied by the sharp contrast between this expression and the innocent, absentminded girl Yuri pretended to be. At the same time, he was suspicious toward Lyle, who didn’t seem surprised at all.

“Why did you call me here?” Lyle asked.

“Oh, please. As if you don’t already know. Do I really have to say it?”

“I’m asking because I don’t know.”

“Honestly...” Yuri let out a sigh, but she didn’t seem the least bit annoyed. To the contrary, she looked thrilled. “I’ll keep it simple. I want you to join the knighthood. I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“I already said no to that.”

“I know. But this time, you’re going to say yes,” Yuri said, brimming with confidence. “If you join the knighthood, then I’ll lend you the power to become the next Lord Meleze.”

Dida was shocked. *What in the world is she talking about?*

“How do you know where I’m from?” Lyle asked Yuri quietly.

“I’m the future queen. I’m in a position to easily obtain any information I desire. Here and there, I noticed that your gestures were so elegant, and I thought it strange, so I looked into it. I was surprised. I couldn’t believe you were the illegitimate son of Lord Meleze. Your poor mother—having a man who was old enough to be her father fall in love with her. She didn’t even have feelings for your father, yet his wife’s jealousy got her killed. As a woman, I sympathize with her.”

Dida was so stunned at this revelation that he forgot to maintain his composure. His mouth flapped open and closed, but no sound came out.

“It seems like you didn’t ever tell your partner about your past, hm?” Yuri smirked at Dida’s reaction. “It’s horrible, isn’t it? His son, the current Lord Meleze, has no idea. Your mother was killed, *you* were nearly killed and banished, and yet not only does he have no idea, but he actually tried to recruit you! You want to avenge your mother, don’t you? It’s a shame the former Lord Meleze is already dead, but why not take revenge on his son? Well? That sounds good, right?”

There was a wild frenzy in Yuri’s eyes. She didn’t hesitate at all to suggest this. It almost looked as if she personally hated Count Meleze.

“Unfortunately, that’s unnecessary.” But Lyle did not share that enthusiasm. He just quietly stared at her.

“What...are you talking about?” Yuri stared, clearly stunned.

“I said, it’s unnecessary.”

“You’re lying!” Yuri’s face twisted with anger, and she grabbed Lyle’s arm. “You have to hate him! That’s why you once tried to join the knights, isn’t it? That’s what I heard. Don’t tell me that airheaded, goody-two-shoes duke’s daughter seduced you?!”

Her intensity made Dida’s eyes widen.

But Lyle only coolly looked down at her. “I cast aside the Meleze name. I was told long ago that I had no right to use it in the first place. I died when my lady took me in. I died, and I was reborn. So, I am no longer interested in House Meleze, and I have absolutely no desire to join the knighthood.” He calmly pried Yuri’s hands off of him and stared her down with complete composure. “The only reason I came here is because I wanted to sort out whether you knew about my past. It

was my gestures, was it? I'll be more careful from now on."



Lyle turned on his heel, completely having lost interest in this exchange.

“Wait! Why...? You can’t just cast aside your past so easily! Hate and resentment only pile up and grow stronger. Isn’t it the same for you?”

“It is, in a way. But there’s no reason to be obsessed with what’s already happened. Besides, I’ve found something more important to me, so I no longer care about any of that.” Lyle said simply and then left the room.

Yuri watched him go, her face as enraged as a demon’s.

“My, my. Unusual to see you so out of control,” Divan said, appearing out of nowhere.

Yuri glared up at him. “Don’t eavesdrop.”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping. They sensed someone was here, although obviously, they couldn’t have known it was me.” Divan didn’t seem to wither under her gaze; in fact, he seemed amused by her ire. “I investigated him because you said you wanted a fierce fighter on your side after Dorssen disappeared... But now I see...you thought you’d found a kindred spirit in him.”

“Shut up!” Yuri snarled with surprising volume; it sounded like the anger came from the depths of her heart.

Her intensity could have frightened many a grown man. But this man kept smiling and came closer to her. “I won’t. Because if you get too caught up in trivial matters like this and get distracted from your true goal, you’ll cause problems for me too. Were you lying when you said you were going to surpass your mother and get revenge on this kingdom?”

Divan roughly grabbed her by the cheek and stared at her from close up. His eyes were cold and sharp.

“It wasn’t a lie,” Yuri ground out. “I’m not a coward. Not like him.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.” Divan smiled and let go of her face. “Still, if we can’t have Lyle on our side, then perhaps we should have retained Dorssen for longer? It was incredibly difficult making him disappear, you know.”

“He had no further use to us. That woman got to him, and he was starting to think about things he shouldn’t have. There’s no reason to keep someone alive if they’re just going to get in our way, right?”

“I’m relieved you haven’t become a coward, either.”

“Are you joking? That’s not funny at all.”

“Pardon me.”

“Well, no matter. Ah, it’s almost time for the tailor to come. I’m going to have her make me a simply *gorgeous* dress for the meeting.”

“The meeting?”

“Yes, the meeting to formally announce Edward’s ascension.”

“Suggest to the queen that she should postpone it.”

“Huh? What’s gotten into you, Divan? This is the prime opportunity for Edward to become the ruler of this country!”

“Unfortunately, we’ve still been unable to get rid of the first prince. Not only that, but despite bringing all my resources to bear, I can’t even locate him. There are too many things we don’t know.”

“The ruined first prince? Please. What can he do? Goodness, Divan, it’s like you’ve been slacking. Hurry up and bring me the first prince’s head!”

“But...”

“Enough already. I’m the queen of Tasmeria. I did everything you asked me to do. Honestly...stop prattling on here with me and go do what you’re supposed to. I don’t need your help anymore, you know. I can do everything on my own.”

“Very well.” For a moment, Divan froze, but then he responded with a smile. However, the smile was so icy, that anyone who glimpsed it would have been chilled to the bone. “I shall take my leave now.” He bowed once more and then left the room.

“So the time has finally come to cut ties... No matter. I don’t need him to carry out my plans anymore.” Yuri murmured to herself, her words echoing heavily in the empty room.

Meanwhile, the two guards silently left the castle.

“Hey,” Dida said to Lyle, having made up his mind.

“What?”

“Are you sure I should’ve come with you? I’m convinced that’s not how you wanted me to find out about your past.”

“It’s fine. I never intended to hide it from you. I just never found the right time to tell you. Especially since I already knew about *your* past...” The sharpness that had been carved into Lyle’s face had melted away. He once more looked like the Lyle who Dida knew so well.

“Heh. All right, then.” Dida chuckled shyly as he whacked Lyle on the back. His partner smiled at him. “Still, can’t believe you’re a noble. But I guess now that I know about it, it makes sense. Does Princess know?” he pressed mercilessly.

However, the teasing only made Lyle feel more comfortable, and he smiled.

“What, that I’m the illegitimate son of Lord Meleze? Or that that woman called me here today?”

“Both, of course.”

“I didn’t tell her about today. I didn’t want to burden her with anything else right now.”

“Got it...”

“But of course she knows about my past. Master Armelia looked into my background when they took me in. Plus, when our mistress first took me in, I resisted her and told her everything.”

“You resisted Princess?! Damn, I wish I could’ve seen that!” Dida burst out laughing, but Lyle let out a sigh.

“I wish I could forget it ever happened.”

“How did you resist her?”

“I said, ‘I’m the son of Lord Meleze!’ and ‘I’m only alive so I can join the knights!’ And then finally I said, ‘I don’t have time to play house with some little rich girl!’”

“Oof... You actually said that?”

“That’s why I wish I could forget it!”

“Hm... So why’d a rich boy like you agree to go with her in the end?”

“Don’t call me that. Anyway...probably because I made her cry.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“I know. But after she heard about my past, she *cried*. She said she couldn’t stand her own powerlessness.”

“Huh?”

“I thought at first she was just pitying me, but this five-year-old girl was honestly lamenting her helplessness. She heard my story and wished she could do something to help. Then she asked me to wait. She said that if I really wanted to join the knights, she’d help me get powerful enough to make my wish come true.” Lyle looked off in the distance, a sentimental gleam in his eye. “Now that I think about it, she was the first person who really saw me for who I was and wanted to help me. My mother never wanted me, so she hated the very sight of me. And my father never had the least interest in me.”

“Guess nobles have it rough too, huh? But it sounds like Princess hasn’t changed much, even since then.”

“That’s right. She was the first person to truly accept me for all that I am, and she won me over. After that, I had no desire to join the knights at all. Actually, the reason why I got the original recommendation from Master was because Mistress brought it up to him.”

“Really? I had no idea.”

“Neither did I. Apparently, around the time we started training with Master, she asked him to do it once I had won his favor. Master told me all this later.”

“But you didn’t join the knights in the end.” Dida lightly clapped Lyle on the back.

“Of course not. I can’t think of anything more fulfilling than being Mistress’s bodyguard. Besides, I have a partner who’s always got my back.” Lyle clapped Dida on the back in response. Dida just smiled bashfully at him.

Chapter 21: The Duke's Daughter Prepares for War

THREE DAYS LATER, I headed to the castle to represent Armelia in the meeting of the nobility. Everyone else in attendance was a man—I was the only woman. I wore a tuxedo-cut jacket with a skirt made of the same fabric. I hadn't been instructed to do so, but it helped me get in the mood.

I was led to a large conference room separate from the throne room. The seats were placed evenly apart in a semi-circle arcing toward the center, like a parliament chamber. This was a vestige from when the kingdom was founded; Tasmeria became a kingdom after winning over or conquering all the lords of the various regions. In order to avoid chaos when the kingdom was new, they had gathered the lords who governed their various domains in this very room for meetings. Here, the lords had presented their opinions to the king regarding how they thought the kingdom should proceed.

Several nobles spotted me and whispered amongst themselves. Some were frowning, some threw looks of contempt my way. To be honest, I was incredibly irritated that they made no attempt to hide their reactions.

Just then, I spotted my uncle, Marquis Anderson, surrounded by people. He smiled when he saw me. That was all it took to banish my dark feelings, and I smiled at him in return.

The seats had been decided beforehand. They were arranged in order of each family's rank. I sat in the first seat reserved for a duke's family. Marquis Marea, who was sitting next to me, scowled in my direction. He had quite the presence, as usual. Even though he was only a marquis, he sat in a seat equal to that of a duke—with an incredibly arrogant attitude, I might add.

As I scanned the room, I noted that most of the nobility was in attendance. Even Count Sagitalia and the nobles from Prince Alfred's faction had come, though they had resigned from their posts. The only one I didn't see in attendance was Baron Messi.

An attendant announced that the royal family was about to enter,

so the room fell instantly quiet. Queen Ellia, Ed, and Yuri appeared from the main doors and took their seats.

“I have summoned you all here today for one reason and one reason alone—to discuss this kingdom’s next king,” Queen Ellia said in a solemn voice once everyone was settled in their seats. “As you all know, the kingdom is in great turmoil. This is even more reason why we need a strong leader. And what better person is there than Edward?”

She phrased it as a question, but it sounded like a statement to me. I was certain the others in the room thought the same.

“The queen is right! No one is more well suited to ascend the throne than Edward! We must all celebrate our new king!” Marquis Marea declared.

The second prince’s faction applauded to echo his words.

Ed rose from his seat. “Thank you, everyone. I swear to be a wonderful king, one who will live up to your hopes.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “What a farce.”

“What a farce.”

Amidst the rejoicing, my voice and another overlapped. The dissenting opinions silenced the room, and everyone turned their attention to us.

“Lord Anderson! What do you mean, a farce?” Even though I’d said the same thing, Queen Ellia ignored me. Instead, she shouted at my uncle with a glare.

“According to the kingdom’s laws, the rightful successor to the throne is the oldest child,” said my uncle. “And unless the oldest child is seriously ill or otherwise unable to ascend, *they* ought to become the ruling monarch. So what else could you call a decision made by the royal family, *which violates its own laws*, other than a farce?”

“You think someone who hasn’t even deigned to be present would make a better king? Impossible.”

“It’s not for you to decide, Your Majesty. You do not have the power to decide the order of succession. Since the king has passed, the right of succession was immediately passed to his first child. That’s the law of this kingdom. In other words, he does not need the permission of the *former* queen.”

As my uncle spoke, Ellia turned her gaze from him to me. It was a spiteful gaze, as if she despised me from the depths of her soul.

“And Your Highness,” my uncle continued as he addressed Ed, “you’ve just told us your intention to be a wonderful king. Well, just how do you plan to overcome the difficulties presently plaguing this kingdom?”

“I don’t have to answer to you.”

“In fact, you do,” I said. “If you want to continue receiving aid from my domain, that is.”

“Why should I listen to you?” Ed scoffed. “I’m the next king! To speak to me in that manner is nothing less than insolence, even if you are a noble!”

“Th-that’s right! Someone kick this woman out!”

No one moved a muscle, not even the soldiers who stood guard in the chamber. You see, the castle guards who usually stood at that post had been replaced with guards who belonged to my grandfather. They would not move unless under his direct orders. Even though my grandfather had withdrawn from the battlefield, he was still Tasmeria’s *hero*. Nothing could weaken that power. To be honest, I had never intended to involve my grandfather in this, but here we were.

“At least forty percent of the grain and corn you’ve levied has come from *my* domain,” I said.

“Well, that’s...”

“And if you consider the scope of this disaster, it’s no wonder there’s a food shortage. But why has *one* domain been asked to supply so much of the food when there are so many others to call upon—all of whom are represented here?”

“Because your domain is so large! Moreover, a duke’s family should want to do everything it can for the kingdom!”

“What are you talking about? Do you have any idea what it means to take forty percent of your levies from a single domain? You truly don’t understand, do you? You know, I was shocked when I heard the results from the survey. I wonder how many citizens will go hungry once my domain stops supplying you with relief? Food production in the capital is especially low, so it wouldn’t take very long for the situation to grow dire. *That* is why I’m asking. What plans and measures

will you take to deal with this problem?”

I laughed as I glanced over at the second prince’s faction. Some among them shared Queen Ellia’s reaction, but those who were already experiencing scarcity in their domains averted their eyes uncomfortably.

Several other nobles raised their voices in assent. They were either part of the first prince’s or the neutral faction, whom I had already either bought or bribed to join my alliance.

You see, Armelia’s assets and rations overwhelmingly surpassed any other domain’s. Thus, I’d gone to negotiate with them all with that card up my sleeve. I’d done so with House Anderson as well. Even though we were related by blood, we both had our own citizens to protect. Our deal, in short, was that they would provide us military strength while Armelia offered them funds. Once our two domains were united under the same flag, many other domains had followed suit.

As soon as I arrived in the capital, I’d rushed to visit as many houses as I could, as well as had Tanya deliver letters. The domain north of Armelia was part of the second prince’s faction, so that had been difficult, but since we were separated by mountains and they bordered House Anderson’s domain to the west, they had succumbed to our alliance, as had the domains adjoining them.

Ed scowled slightly, perhaps surprised to hear that anyone agreed with me. “I’m receiving supplies from you so that disaster doesn’t occur, aren’t I? No other answer is needed.”

“My duchy can’t spare any further resources. My citizens are going hungry. As the acting governor of Armelia, I decline your request to lend further aid to the kingdom.”

“What?! That’s utter nonsense! You listen here, if you continue to defy the royal family, we’ll send soldiers to Armelia to deal with you appropriately!”

“You think the kingdom—or *you*, for that matter—have the support for such an undertaking? If you are really to become king, I believe you’d be better served thinking about your plans *very* carefully.”

“Silence! This kingdom is mine! I could have you both arrested for treason right now and seize your domains—and that would solve everything!” Ed’s eyes flared as if he thought he really had a brilliant idea.

Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea instantly offered their agreement, as did the other members of his faction.

That was the moment I'd been waiting for. The same went for my uncle.

"In that case, we shall excuse ourselves," he announced in a cold voice. "Staying here a moment longer is simply a waste of our time."

I rose at the same time as he did. Nearly half of the other attendees rose from their seats as well, to show their assent.

"Everyone, please calm down!" Yuri cried in a loud voice. "Don't look so angry! Our first priority right now needs to be the citizens!"

Ed seemed to think her frantic tone admirable, because he beamed at her.

"Let's talk this over—for the sake of the citizens!" Yuri went on. "I'm sure Prince Edward's brother will understand!"

Understand what? I thought to myself in confusion.

"After all, he's not even here," Yuri said. "I'm sure Prince Edward's brother is a very sensitive man. So..."

"Yuri, you have such a kind heart... Everyone, listen to yourselves! Compared to her, you're—" Ed broke off. "Just as Yuri said, my brother has been out of the picture for a very long time. He couldn't handle the pressure of being the first prince. That's exactly why I've been responsible for this kingdom in his stead. I *will* protect the citizens."

"You needn't be king to protect the citizens, Your Highness. And yet you've done absolutely nothing, save for one thing—seek aid from Armelia." My uncle glared coldly at Ed. "And Miss Yuri, *daughter of a baron*. This is not a playground for daughters of nobles. You have no right to speak here." He didn't even bother looking at her as he spoke.

"What...? Th-that's so mean!" Yuri gasped, shedding tears.

"Lord Anderson! How dare you say such cruel words to my fiancée!"

"Are they really cruel?" I muttered.

Ed turned his spiteful gaze toward me.

"Please have mercy! I walked all the way here with only water and nothing to eat!" I said.

Ed scoffed at me, as if he had no idea what I was talking about.

“Please at least help my children! I don’t care what happens to me as long as my children are taken care of!”

Those were the words I’d heard when I traveled to the border. The voices of the people that would not leave my ears.

“These are the voices of citizens from other domains who traveled to Armelia. You say we are here to speak for the sake of the citizens? Yet what in the world have you done for those citizens to save them from such pain and suffering?” My voice shook with anger. “I have found, due to an investigation, that the sizable levies of food and goods taken from my domain are being stored in the castle and the residences of nobles. You said my uncle’s words were cruel? Your complete inaction while you protect yourselves and abandon the citizens of this kingdom is far, far crueler.”

“I-I don’t know anything about that!”

“Prince Edward is right! If such a thing is true, then it’s been done to frame us!” Yuri exclaimed.

Ed glared at me again. “Th-that’s right! Anyway, there’s no proof that Lady Iris has even sent us any levies at all! I’m sure this is all a bluff—an attempt to lay the blame on us!”

I heaved a sigh.

“Iris, there’s no point in continuing this,” my uncle said.

Those standing with our alliance agreed. We of course had receipts and proper records to document our donations to the crown—in other words, definitive proof.

“We’ll be going now,” my uncle said.

“Wait! If you leave now, then you admit that what I said is true, and I will send every soldier—”

“Well, I don’t think that would be a very good idea. The royal family doesn’t have as much power as you seem to imagine it does. And if our two houses forsake you now, it will be over for you.”

The room was abuzz with increasing chaos, but then someone else suddenly walked in, and it fell deathly silent. Not even Ed could speak.

The reason for everyone’s shock was not that this man had interrupted a prince, it was that he had appeared through the same

doors that the royal family had.

But I was the most shocked out of every person there. Not because someone else had walked through those doors—I couldn't understand why *he* had walked through them. What was Dean doing here?!

“Who are you?” Ed asked, baffled.

“What a terrible thing to ask of your half-brother.”

“What?!” Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea leapt to their feet.

“My name is Alfred. Alfred Dean Tasmeria. The rightful heir to the throne of this kingdom.” Dean's voice struck the room like lightning. He didn't speak with any particular volume, but it echoed through each corner of the room. A chill ran through everyone who heard it, as if they'd been touched by divine revelation. It had a strange, alluring quality that compelled one to want to do just as he said.





“Wh-what proof do you have of this claim?” Marquis Marea shouted anxiously.

“Step away! This man is His Highness, Prince Alfred!” A man appeared from behind Dean, chastising the marquis. “How dare you doubt a member of the royal family! You *do* realize that’s grounds for treason, don’t you?”

When I saw who it was, I couldn’t believe my eyes. My own cousin, Rudy. I had never been more confused in my life.

“Now, I just heard some very interesting things in this chamber,” said Dean. “No one is more well suited to ascend the throne than Edward”? That’s simply false. Because the rightful heir to the throne is the first prince—me. That was the first law put to writing when this kingdom was founded; why, it’s written in our constitution. And absolutely no one has the power to break that law. In fact, you are all under arrest for treason under the grounds of plotting to usurp the crown.”

“Wh-what?! What proof—”

“Proof again? Well, this very meeting is proof enough. Isn’t that right, Father Rafsimons? You aren’t a noble of this kingdom, so I shall ask you. Did I imagine everything I just heard in this chamber?”

“No, Your Highness. I heard exactly the same thing.”

“That’s what I thought. Quite foolish of you to rush things without confirming my death.”

“No one will follow you, anyway! Why, your mother was nothing more than the daughter of a count!” Queen Ellia screamed. Her face was twisted with rage, her eyes filled with hatred. As I stared at her, it almost looked like the face she had taken such pains to beautify with makeup was crumbling before our very eyes.

“Is that right? Many in this room rank below a count. How dare you say such a thing? I don’t believe I can allow you to be in this room any longer. Take these two away at once.”

The guards immediately sprang into action.

“What?! How dare you?! Let go of me at once!”

They resisted, but it was useless. The guards dragged Ellia and her father away.

“Grandfather! Mother!” Ed cried to try to stop them, but they were already gone. “You bastard! How dare you...!”

Ed lunged toward Dean, but the remaining guards surrounded him and Yuri. She was trembling with fear.

“I can understand why a person might think that Queen Ellia’s claims make sense,” I said to break the tension. I looked straight at Dean. “I wouldn’t say that Prince Edward should be king, but what will change if *you* ascend the throne? Prince Alfred, it seems as though you have not forsaken us, but if I am to be confident that you won’t, I must know your plan.”

For a moment, Dean seemed shocked by my challenge, but then he flashed me a confident smile.

That’s the smile of his that I love the most, I inadvertently thought.

“Forsake you? I should be afraid that *you* might forsake *us*.” Dean turned to the rest of the gathered. “To you fools who agreed with my younger brother when he foolishly said these two should be arrested and their domains seized: Think carefully. Armelia provides forty percent of the aid to this kingdom, yet life in that duchy remains more prosperous than anywhere else. No other domain could possibly amass as many resources as they have. If Armelia withdraws their aid, where will *your* domains source their food and goods? Your aid will be nearly halved. Even if you don’t presently require assistance, if the Armelian businesses in your domains withdraw to their homeland, your economies will suffer a serious blow. They continue to do business with our kingdom so long as they see profit from the relationship. But if the disadvantages outweigh the benefits, they’ll merely start doing business with other kingdoms instead. Armelia has a port; this would be easily done. The only reason they haven’t done so yet is because it would require slightly more effort.”

“B-but if we arrest these two, then we can take their goods for the kingdom!” a noble from the second prince’s faction said.

“As I said, that would be foolish. My brother said he would send the military, but the leader of that military is General Gazell. Not only does the general belong to House Anderson, but that house has a long-standing connection with House Armelia. Moreover, the two domains border each other. If these houses are allied, we cannot send the military to face them.”

“But...”

“Enough. Even if we took Armelia by force, the kingdom would not have the means to govern it. The citizens would not obey. They are loyal to *her*—that’s the domain she’s built.”

The other nobles flinched at Dean’s words.

“I’m so happy to hear you think so highly of my domain,” I said. “And that is why I shall ask again—how do you plan to deal with the difficulties that plague our kingdom?”

Dean had defended Armelia, so now it was my turn. I needed to give him the opportunity to have his moment—and to defend his plan. Hence why I sounded so harsh.

“I’ve already started. I’ve recalled the majority of the counterfeit gold coins in circulation. Only a small number are left floating at the marketplaces. And if any further counterfeits are found, I vow to exchange them for genuine gold. I’ve also developed a means by which to notify the public and spread word about this plan.”

“My, you’ve already taken them out of circulation? How did you do that?”

“The nobles who sold their stockpiles to a certain merchant immediately used their profits to begin doing business with other merchants.”

This clearly rang a bell, as the color drained from several nobles’ faces.

“I used the belongings of the former pope as bait. I couldn’t believe the speed and passion with which they parted with their new gold. It would have been one thing if they were to spend it for the sake of the citizens, but to use it for their own selfish desires? I was speechless.”

“I see... So that’s how you got the counterfeit coins out of circulation. You didn’t even impact the kingdom’s economy by doing so. And by using items that had once been owned by the pope, you ensured they were tempting. Additionally, if these nobles had enough gold on hand to purchase them, then the chances were good that they used the counterfeit gold they had just received.”

“That’s right. Then I had the counterfeit gold coins melted down and the impurities removed, then smelted back into pure gold coins.

Having confiscated most of the counterfeit gold in this manner, I kept tabs on your actions and immediately confiscated counterfeits from whatever your own people collected. Of course, it will be impossible to catch every single coin, but we've done the work. I must credit Marquis Anderson with his tenacity on this issue."

My uncle bowed his head.

"But Prince Alfred, what about the critical issue of the food shortages?" I asked.

"I have traveled across the sea to another kingdom and negotiated with them. At first, I was planning to recover enough to replace the stockpiles that had been sold, but I could not have foreseen the natural disaster that occurred in my absence. I'm terribly sorry to see my people endure such pain. But the goods I secured from the other kingdom have been delivered upon my return. All that's left now is to distribute them to each domain. For this, I must thank Father Rafsimons for his help. He sent valuable monetary aid during this crisis on behalf of the Darryl Church."

"Despite the mistakes the Church made, Your Highness was so lenient with us," said Father Rafsimons as he bowed his head. "All I wish is for the money to be used for the citizens of this kingdom."

I was amazed that he'd so deftly used this opportunity to restore the Darryl Church's status. Bowing his head to Dean demonstrated his obeisance, while at the same time this public gratitude demonstrated the power of the Church. I was certain that he was doing this to show both publicly and privately that the Church was acting in the right, just as he had aimed for.

The same Church had once demanded donations from the nobles and thrown charity galas. I had a feeling that these events were where the Church's new donations had come from. There had likely also been some help from whatever funds the queen dowager had secretly stowed away.

"Then I am certain this kingdom will know peace and prosperity should you ascend the throne," I said and bowed my head. "As acting governor, I pledge Armelia's full support to your claim."

I had shown my and House Anderson's support. Dean had already explained the power of our two domains to the gathered. On top of that, he had just illustrated his own sterling track record. By his own hand,

he had laid the path for the kingdom to recover. Anyone who stood against him now would in essence be rejecting the only path to salvation. The only others they could turn to—Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea—had been arrested.

“Wh-what a splendid birth of a king we just witnessed.”

“I-I agree. We just witnessed something magnificent indeed.”

One by one, those nobles who had supported Ed now praised Dean. The waves of affirmation gradually increased until the entire chamber was filled with applause.

“Don’t be fooled!” Ed had been standing there, completely flabbergasted, but now he screamed angrily. “It was said before—there’s no proof that he’s my older brother! His attendant there belongs to House Anderson! He’s nothing more than an impostor, dead set on usurping the crown!”

All of a sudden, Yuri turned toward the doors and shrieked. “S-somebody! Help!”

“What is it?” a voice called in response.

At her cry, several men wearing knights’ armor rushed in. Ed and Yuri let out sighs of relief at the sight of them.

“Arrest them! They’re impostors trying to usurp the crown!” Ed howled, but the knights did not move. “Why aren’t you moving?!”

“Your Highness, I’m terribly sorry, but that is Prince Alfred. We live to serve the royal family. We cannot possibly turn our sword against one of them.”

“What are you talking about?! Where is the proof that he is my older brother?!”

“Well, we had the honor of serving him at the detached palace.”

Watching this exchange, Yuri was completely astonished. “No...” she murmured. “No... I don’t know these knights... Where is the knight commander?!”

“The knight commander is under house arrest,” Dean said gaily. “Lord Meleze was a knight in name only, so he never had any right to become the knight commander. There were several such unqualified persons in the knighthood, and they have all been removed from their posts. Now, to continue with what I was saying, I must attend to more

pressing matters, so there is nothing more to say on this matter. Shall we move on to the next subject?"

Everyone stared, wondering what he would want to talk about—including me.

"But first—guards! Arrest by brother and Yuri."

"What?!"

"What?!"

Before the two of them could even shout, the guards surrounding them sprang into action and seized them both.

"Why...?" Ed croaked as he was arrested.

"I told you why. You, your mother, and your grandfather were engaged in a plot to usurp the throne. So it's only natural that you must face the consequences for that."

"But Yuri has nothing to do with this!"

"Perhaps. But she is not a member of the royal family, yet she walked into this room through the door reserved for royals, and furthermore, she's been using funds from accounts reserved for royals. That is nothing less than fraud: impersonating a member of the royal family. Or have she and Edward already been married? Father Rafsimons?"

"No. The Darryl Church has no record of such a union."

"Then she must be arrested as well."

"Let me—" Edward was still trying to protect Yuri. He loved her so much that he wanted to take the arrow for her.

"I'd say the larger problem is that you did nothing to stop her," Dean said to him. "But the responsibility lies with her. Even if you tried to protect her, she has committed various other crimes. You will be jailed separately until sufficient evidence is gathered to prove the case against her. Take them away."

"Please wait! Your Highness! Why would you punish your own flesh and blood, your own younger brother like this? Please reconsider!" Yuri resisted the soldiers and tried to approach Dean.

"Perhaps that argument would carry weight if we were normal siblings." Dean murmured, bringing hope into Yuri's eyes. "But we are royalty. Each drop of blood that flows through our veins exists for this

kingdom. And anything that serves to hurt this kingdom must be cut away.”

“No!” Yuri cried weakly, shedding tears—playing the role of the damsel in distress. Several witnesses probably felt sorry for her, the poor girl pleading for her fiancé despite being under arrest herself.

Dean walked over to her. She gazed up at him with desperate eyes.

I wanted to scream. *Don't you dare look at him like that!*

“It seems as though your friend let many of his comrades into this castle,” said Dean. “I had them all leave, along with him. So don’t imagine that you have a chance to worm your way out of this one.”

“What?!”

Dean leaned toward her and whispered something into her ear. I don’t know what he said, but it must have been something meaningful, because as soon as he pulled away, she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Everyone in the room stood shocked at her sudden change in demeanor.

“Yuri!” Ed slipped out of the guards’ grasp and ran over to her. “Yuri, are you all right? Yuri!”

But Yuri did not answer him. All she did was mumble, “It’s a lie, it’s a lie...” over and over again with vacant eyes.

Ed stood protectively between her and a guard. “There’s something wrong with her! Take her to the hospital!”

“A doctor can examine her after she’s jailed. Guards.”

The guards moved once more to seize them.

“Stop it! Yuri!”

Yuri wept. Ed reached toward her, trying to take hold of her hand. Dean coolly watched as he once more told the guards to take them by force. He was obeyed.

“Now, we got quite off track there, but let’s get back to business,” said Dean. “Shall we, Berne?”

Hearing that name come from Dean’s mouth shocked me. I turned to see Berne walk through the doors the other nobles had entered through. The entire chamber was filled with confusion as Berne strode

toward Dean. I couldn't even believe the person I saw was my brother. His hair was cut short, he was incredibly thin, and there were bags under his eyes. The naivete in his eyes was gone, replaced now with a sharpness I'd never seen before.

Berne bowed his head before Dean.

"You heard everything, didn't you? The voices of these fools agreeing with Edward that we should seize Armelia and Anderson's domains?" Dean chuckled with amusement.

Berne was completely expressionless. Instead, he looked around the room. His piercing gaze shot through everyone.

"I'm sure they will agree with Your Highness's plan if it benefits the citizens," Berne said, his eyes growing even more intense.

"I'll have Berne explain our plans moving forward. Everyone, listen carefully to him."

My brother took a step forward and spoke. He began with a list of nobles. The point was not immediately apparent.

"The nobles I just named will forfeit their domains and be stripped of their titles."

Berne's statement rocked the chamber. This was without a doubt the first time in the history of Tasmeria that so many nobles would have their titles removed. The room was suddenly filled with cursing and shouts. Berne seemed intimidated by this, and he lowered his gaze. The yelling grew even louder at that.

They looked to Dean, demanding to know just how their domains would be controlled without them, but he just smiled. Meanwhile, Berne looked up.

Suddenly, the people cursing him all fell silent as they saw his face—or more accurately, his eyes. Berne looked around the chamber, expressionless. His eyes were filled with hatred...and violent anger. Anger so intense, it made the fury displayed earlier seem lukewarm. He didn't speak, but the way he stared at them made it seem like he was saying "Is that all you've got?"

"He reminds me of your father," my uncle murmured with amusement.

"The people whose names I just listed sold their stockpiles for their own profit—even the bare minimum of rations they are, by law,

required to keep. Leaders who wrong their own citizens should be removed from their posts at once,” Berne said quietly. But what was quiet about it was his expression, for his voice was filled with just as much malice as his eyes.

“Y-you’re saying we have to give up land that’s been in our family for generations for such a small offense?!”

“A ‘small offense’? That *small offense* cost thousands, no—tens of thousands of lives!” Berne snarled. His rage seemed to fill the entire chamber.

“Wh-what else could we do? My family has been impoverished for quite some time!”

“We didn’t know a flood was coming! Even Prince Alfred said he couldn’t have foreseen it!”

“Those rations were supposed to be in place in case of that exact kind of unforeseen disaster. Even if the flooding hadn’t occurred, you were still in the wrong and would still be punished accordingly,” Berne responded coolly to those who protested and complained.

“Why?!”

“Because as I just said, you broke the laws of this kingdom. You didn’t realize you were using counterfeit coins to do business, you wastefully expended your domains’ fortunes, and you brought chaos to the kingdom.”

“That’s—”

“But your greatest crime was making deals with an enemy kingdom while we were under a cease-fire.” Berne didn’t say that last sentence loudly. But the words fell heavily on every person in the room.

“Wh-what did you say?!”

“You didn’t know? The merchant you did business with—Divan? He’s a vanguard from Tweil. The reason he bought so much food is because he’s sending it back to his kingdom, and in doing so, depleting our kingdom of its resources.”

“What proof do you have?!”

“Stop with the lies!”

None of them would accept Berne’s words—because the moment they accepted it, they knew no mercy awaited them.

“I have proof.” Berne wasn’t worried. He reminded me of how I had been back during my excommunication scandal. I’d had that same look on my face—a confidence that I really had my enemies where I needed them. “Lord Messi has already captured citizens from Tweil who were traversing back and forth across our borders. They told us all about the relationship between Divan and Tweil.”

My brother had changed so much since the day he yelled at me about my broken engagement... In a good way, of course.

“Furthermore, thanks to Lord Messi, we’ve recovered a portion of the food that was supposed to be sent to Tweil. Some was hidden or already sent by Divan, but the stores we recovered were marked with the family crests of those families I named.” Berne smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “How lucky for us that noble families take so much pride in their name that they brand everything with it, hm? They’re so dedicated to the practice that not even Divan could erase it off everything. Family crests are quite wonderful, so I very much understand the urge.”

To me, it sounded like he was saying: “You lot take pride in nothing but for your family name. And that’s what wrapped the noose around your neck.”

I was all but certain that this was what was going through his mind.

“You can take a look at the recovered crates later, if you’d like,” Berne said. “Although I’ve already shown the prince, and he agreed that it was sufficient proof.”

“Then, once you take all of that into consideration, look into a certain baron. Ask yourself why he doesn’t even stay in the capital during the social season.”

These were the words Milo had said that Tanya had reported to me. Of course, she had looked into it. Divan’s company was based in Count Monroe’s domain. No matter how well Divan hid his spoils while they were in the kingdom, ultimately he sent them to Tweil—which meant he had to travel from Count Monroe’s domain through Baron Messi’s. Once Divan reached the Monroe domain, he had a free pass to deliver his goods.

When Baron Messi wasn’t in the capital, he was patrolling the border of his domain, which was also the border of the kingdom with

Tweil. Lately, he'd spent much more time patrolling the border between his domain and Count Monroe's. In other words, he had worked vigorously toward gathering evidence to expose the corruption within the kingdom, including Divan's plans and the secret exchange of goods between Monroe and Tweil.

"As such, I'm always in a war frame of mind, if you will."

Baron Messi said that to me on the night I met him. He was right. It was a war, even though there were no actual battles taking place. Dean wasn't just fighting for the throne against Ed, nor was he merely fighting for power against House Marea in the nobility's game of musical chairs. He was fighting for the entire kingdom, a much graver responsibility than I had.

And yet he had given me so much help. That thought made tears spring unbidden to my eyes.

Dean took a step forward.

"Your Highness," said Berne cautiously.

Dean smiled and held up a hand, so Berne quickly bowed and stood back.

"Nobles are exalted people," Dean said. "But they are not exalted by birth. No, they were chosen by the citizens to stand above the rest to guide and protect the people. But some among those who call themselves nobles are arrogant and ignorant; they have forgotten why they stand so high, and instead they look down on those below."

Once again, Dean's voice struck the room like lightning. This time, there were no arguments or objections. "When one has committed the crime of treason with an enemy kingdom, social status no longer matters," he said. "No status can change the fact of treachery against your own kingdom, and it must be punished accordingly. Isn't that correct?"

The members of the first prince's faction, who had remained seated after Dean appeared, slowly began to stand up, one by one. Then they bowed, one after another, showing their respect to their chosen prince. It was a deep bow, the kind one would perform in the presence of one's king.

I followed suit and curtsied.

"Arrest the persons from the list of names Lord Berne read! And I

call this meeting adjourned.”

“Finally, if you could all remain in the capital for the time being,” said Berne. “In a few days, His Highness will summon you for another meeting.”

That meeting shook the kingdom to its core. A few weeks passed, but it felt like longer, because in that short amount of time, the capital changed drastically. Thanks to the aid that Dean secured from other kingdoms, in addition to the stockpiles recovered from the border, life in the city was almost back to normal.

The food and goods I sent to the capital from Armelia were indeed found to have been at the castle and with nobles belonging to Prince Ed’s faction, just as Berne had claimed. These were confiscated and redistributed to the citizens. But perhaps the greatest change was that the vast majority of counterfeit gold coins disappeared from circulation. The marketplaces were once again beginning to bustle with activity.

There were many changes inside the castle as well. The nobles on Berne’s list were being held under house arrest until their trials. I had a feeling more charges would be filed against them before their trials, as well. Furthermore, due to their crimes, Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea were beheaded. Count Monroe met that same fate.

The treacherous nobles were stripped of their titles, and their lands were confiscated. Not even their distant relatives were allowed to take over for them. Plotting to disrupt the lawful order of succession and bargaining with an enemy kingdom were severe crimes. The close family members of the guilty parties would either be killed or sent to live out the rest of their lives in monasteries and convents.

There wasn’t as much of an interruption in the governance of the kingdom as I feared there might be. Those in the first prince’s faction who didn’t resume their posts were so well regarded in their fields that they took to work for Dean like fish to water.

On one particular day, I was headed to House Anderson. Their mansion was quite close to the Armelia mansion. It didn’t take long at all for my carriage to arrive at their gates. A servant showed me into a

room where my uncle awaited me, along with my aunt and my grandfather.

“Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with me today,” I said.

“Iris, we’re flesh and blood. There’s no need for those formalities. Now sit down,” my uncle said kindly as I bowed to him.

I did as he said and sat. “Grandfather, Uncle, I can’t thank you enough for your help with recent matters. I’d like to personally express my gratitude, as well as on behalf of Armelia. Thank you so much.”

“Nothing could make me happier than helping you, Iris!” My grandfather let out a hearty chuckle, as he always did.

“It was a winning strategy. You’re the one who came up with the idea to get out of the deadlock, so there’s no need to thank us.” My uncle smiled gently at me. He had the same smile as Rudy.

“Honestly, why can’t you just admit it?” my aunt said. “Your uncle was terribly worried about you and Merry, but he said it wasn’t easy to take action just because of his position as governor. So he was thrilled when you came to him with your idea, Iris.”

“I wasn’t worried about Merry! She’s the kind of person who wouldn’t die even if you killed her!”

“Goodness!”

The turn in the conversation immediately relaxed me, and I joined in on the laughter.

“Well, we can’t rest easy just yet,” said my uncle. “Not until we see which direction Prince Alfred leads this kingdom in.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” said my grandfather. “Rudy thought him worthy enough to be his master, and I trained him myself. I can vouch for his fighting spirit.”

“That’s true. He has the power to make ideals into reality,” I said. “And his little sister is simply wonderful. I know that she’ll give him a great deal of support as part of the royal family.”

My uncle looked a bit surprised. “You’ve met Leticia?”

I’d let my guard down during the course of the conversation, but it was too late to regret it now. “Y-yes, my mother introduced us. She’s a truly lovely person.”

They must have accepted my answer, because no one asked me anything else about her.

“By the way, Iris,” said my grandfather. “I heard something through the grapevine that I need to ask you about.”

“What is it?” I tensed up; it was unusual for my grandfather to beat around the bush.

“I heard the prince of Acacia offered you his hand in marriage.”
I froze.

“Are you going to accept?” he asked.

Naturally, I couldn’t answer him.

“Father, you’re putting Iris in a difficult position here,” said my uncle. “This isn’t the sort of matter for us to meddle in.”

“Ah, forgive me. I was just worried. Iris, I want you to put your own future first. You remember what I said before? I meant it.”

“You don’t have to force yourself to marry. You can stay at home and do whatever makes you happy. And if you ever find yourself with nowhere to go, you can always come to me.”

I smiled, thinking of these words that he’d said to me so long ago.

“Thank you for your concern,” I said. “I will be discussing that matter with my father, and we shall decide from there.”

My heart ached a bit when I said that. Truthfully, I already knew my answer. My heart just hadn’t caught up.

I thought of how Dean had looked in the chamber before the nobility. I wanted to see him. At the same time, he was the last person I wanted to see, because he was the only one who could sway me from my decision. I needed to take action as soon as possible, before any lingering feelings or regrets forced me to stall.

Not long afterward, I received an invitation, just as Berne had said we would. There were even some individuals in attendance this time who hadn’t seen fit to be present at the previous meeting. I attended to represent my father, just as I had last time. Once again, I was the only

woman in the chamber.

Everyone took their seats. A few moments later, Dean entered the room. Rudy and Berne followed him. “Thank you all for coming. I’ll get straight to the point—I’d like to discuss my future plans for the kingdom, and I ask you all to listen to me with open hearts and open minds.” He glanced at Berne.

Berne nodded and began to speak. While everyone focused their attention on my brother, I stared at Dean while I listened.

He seemed so far away.

It was profoundly disrespectful to think of a member of the royal family in such a way, but in some ways, he was much closer to me now than when he had been merely Dean. Yet for some reason, he also felt much, much farther away from me than when he had been in Armelia by my side.

I suppose that only made sense. We both had our own responsibilities and duties to bear. I would never compromise on that, and I knew he wouldn’t either. Once, we had been walking down the same road in the same direction, but things were different now. We had started down different paths. He was so close—so close that I could reach out and touch him...

I never imagined my heart would ache with such sadness. I reached up and clasped my hand to my chest.

Never could I have dreamed that our first meeting would lead to such things. I’d come prepared that day, but this one was different. The distance between us made that all too clear.

Berne continued speaking as I lost myself in my reverie. He declared that all the confiscated domains were to be claimed under the crown. Officials from the palace would be sent to each domain as inspectors, to ensure something of this nature never happened again. They would furthermore be granted the power to interfere in the governance of domains. This was done with two goals in mind. First, to better enable the spread of policies set forth by the kingdom. Second, to engender mutual accountability between the governors and inspectors sent from the castle.

I was sure it wouldn’t be long before an inspector was sent to Armelia. Up until now, I’d had complete freedom to reform Armelia as I saw fit, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t be so simple anymore. Not only

that, but after I saw Berne's performance at these meetings, I had a hunch that my days as acting governor of Armelia were numbered either way.

The meeting continued smoothly. No one really objected to anything. That made sense, as the vast majority of attendees were members of the first prince's faction. They were already in his camp to begin with.

I found myself recalling when Count Sagitalia had leaked these ideas to me at his party.

"I'm confident the prince could succeed. He can change our systems and build the one true kingdom."

The purpose of today's meeting was clear: it was the first step to strengthening the monarchy. Even though the neutral faction understood this, they did not object. Perhaps they found it difficult to speak up when the majority of the attendees were of the first prince's faction, but likely they also feared causing a commotion. They sensed that no matter what objection they raised, Berne would swiftly refute it with sound reasoning. While his outer change had come as a surprise, he had clearly changed within as well.

Berne faced the cunning vipers and the sly foxes that had vied with each other in the castle for decades and silenced them all without budging one bit. Word of his intimidating presences had already traveled around the castle. I wasn't sure who had said it first, but word was that the fire in our bloodline certainly hadn't died out.

Now, when Berne received new information, he had it thoroughly investigated before coming to a conclusion, so unlike that time when he had confronted me about my broken engagement. He'd really grown up and shed his old skin.

While I was lost in my thoughts, one of the nobles spoke for the first time at this meeting. "May I say something?"

"As you wish, Lord Dunglely."

Speaking of the Dungleys, I was certain that Mimosa's wedding had been called off, given that her fiancé belonged to one of the families on Berne's list. I had also sent him the lists that Moneda and Tanya had made to ensure these families wouldn't escape from their crimes. I'd have to send a letter of congratulations to Mimosa soon, although the idea of congratulating someone on a broken engagement

seemed odd.

“I understand your proposals going forward very well, but I’d like to ask about His Highness’s coronation.”

“I can answer that,” Dean answered before Berne could. “As you all know, this matter has left lasting effects on the kingdom. Therefore, I am prioritizing settling the matters at hand, so my coronation won’t be for another year.”

“I understand Your Highness’s arguments. However, and please forgive me for saying this, it’s an undeniable fact that the flames of the opposing faction are still smoldering. The fact that Prince Edward has not yet been punished is proof enough of that. I believe His Highness should take the throne immediately to solidify his position and demonstrate to all that he is our king.”

“I take heed of your warning, Lord Dungleigh. I’ll make arrangements to hold the coronation as soon as possible.”

Marquis Dungleigh bowed his head and took his seat.

Shortly after, the meeting was called to an end. We were told we were free to either return to our domains or remain in the capital. Personally, I wanted to hurry back to Armelia, but I hadn’t decided what to do just yet.

I was about to leave when a servant stopped me. “Lady Iris, His Highness Prince Alfred wishes to see you.”

I froze for a moment. The servant handed me a letter, and it was indeed penned in Dean’s handwriting. I couldn’t believe he was summoning me now, of all times.

“All right. I’ll go right away.”

The letter was genuine, but one could never be too careful, so I elected to have Tanya come with me. The servant led me to a courtyard inside the castle. Dean was already sitting there. He gestured for me to sit in front of him, so I did so. For a moment, Tanya looked surprised when she saw Dean, but she soon recovered her poker face.

“Lady Iris of Armelia, I welcome you.”

I plastered a smile onto my face. “I am honored to be here, Your Highness.”

“Please allow me to introduce myself to you once more. I am

Alfred Dean Tasmeria, the first prince of this kingdom.”

This was his farewell. Perhaps he didn’t think of it that way, but that was what it sounded like to me.

“And I am Iris Lana Armelia.” Even though we knew each other well, we introduced ourselves as if we were meeting for the first time. Since he was so far above me in status, I couldn’t call him by name until he introduced himself to me, and I to him.

In this instant, Dean was in all ways a prince, and I a noblewoman. Here, the past we shared together did not exist.

“I’m terribly sorry for the trouble I’ve caused for both you and Armelia. Please allow me to formally apologize.”

“I don’t deserve such a thing, Your Highness. I only performed my obligation as a noble.”

“Iris, you—I mean, Lady Armelia, you are more of a noble than any other I’ve ever known,” Dean said with a smile.

I wasn’t entirely sure if that was a compliment, but my heart ached. I had seen that same smile so many times.

Silence fell between us, a stark contrast to all those days when we were so pressed for time, neither of us could stop talking to the other.

Dean waved his hand, dismissing his servants from the room.

“Tanya. Leave us,” I said when she didn’t move.

“But...” Tanya hesitated and looked back and forth between me and Dean.

“It’s fine.”

It was slightly inappropriate to be alone with the prince, but this wasn’t a private room—we were outside under the vast sky.

“Yes, my lady.”

Now it was only me and Dean.

His manner of speech immediately changed. “So were you surprised?”

“Yes, quite. Never in a million years did I guess that I would see you there that day.”

Even though I couldn’t see them, I *knew* there were people nearby—guards, at the very least. That was why his question was so vague,

and I kept my answer the same.

I went on. "But at the same time, I finally understood why someone like you had appeared in front of someone like me."

I knew better than anyone that Dean was highly educated, so much so that it had never seemed plausible that he came from a simple merchant's family. In that sense, I wasn't so much surprised that he'd turned out to be the first prince as I was satisfied by the explanation. I suspected he'd come to Armelia to observe me. After all, I was the daughter of a duke who had been expelled from school, suddenly made governor, yet I wasn't just sitting on my hands—I had instantly taken action.

Dean laughed wryly. Apparently, my hunch was correct. I laughed inadvertently as well.

"What is it?" Dean looked at me curiously, given my sudden change in demeanor.

"Ah, it's not important. I was just thinking."

It really wasn't that important. I had only been thinking of why he came to see me. Then I'd realized it didn't matter anymore. I didn't hold his deception against him, and it didn't upset me either. I couldn't be angry or alarmed that he had kept his true identity from me. After all, I had accepted his subterfuge from the beginning, even though I had nursed suspicions all along about his origins. Furthermore, both my grandfather and mother had both known and trusted him.

No, that was pure sophistry. At some point, neither my acceptance of his artifice nor his apparent accolades had even mattered anymore. I'd told myself that as long as Dean was by my side, it didn't matter who he was. I'd thrown out all questions of why. That was why I had absolutely no right to blame him.

As I thought about that, I laughed. I laughed at myself for still being captivated by him even this late in the game. It seemed that love was a terrible illness.

"By the way, Your Highness... Why was Berne with you?" I pushed away my feelings and changed the subject.

"Lord Louis recommended him to me. Apparently, Berne went through quite the shocking experience. He showed up before me one day, saying he'd do anything as long as we could change the direction

in which this kingdom was headed. I could tell he'd become quite a different person from the Berne I remembered."

"I was surprised to see that too. When I saw him at the meeting, I nearly didn't recognize him—inside or out. Especially the inside... I wondered what must have happened, to give him such resolve."

"I wondered the same thing, and I asked. All he said was, 'I saw hell on earth.' It seems he visited a domain of one of the nobles who he named, and the conditions there were most cruel."

"I see."

"After seeing this, perhaps because he once took pride in being a noble, he came to despise the nobility, including himself. That was why he came to work under me. He was the one who devised the majority of this system that will give the monarchy more direct control. He worked tirelessly with both my people and Armelian officials to gather sufficient evidence to ensure those guilty nobles will be held accountable. He barely stopped to take a breath while he gathered the evidence to shed light on this situation. He worked so hard that I really do have to wonder if he was sleeping."

"I see. Well, I'm most pleased to hear that he's been of service to Your Highness." I was staying in the mansion in the capital, yet I'd not seen a speck of Berne. I had thought he was merely busy, though it seemed that he certainly was. As a member of House Armelia, I was awfully pleased by his growth.

"I'd like to thank you for letting me have Berne. We've made various decisions about numerous things, but this issue is far from resolved. It has left lasting effects on each domain. There is still so much left to do."

"I understand," I said. "This kingdom has lost so much."

Dean gave me a troubled smile. "I did the best I could. I did *everything* I could. But I don't hear the screams of those we've lost. I understand that there are things we can't recover."

If this were a game, this would have been the happy ending. The moment would fade to the title screen, and the player could reset and do better next time.

But this was reality. By no miracle could I start all over again. I wasn't God. It was ridiculous of me to even think that I could save

everyone and everything.

Then again, I didn't regret a thing. I wasn't going to run away or give up on anything. However, the idea that I could have done a little bit more plagued my thoughts.

"The results are everything," said Dean. "Even if we do all we can, it doesn't change reality, where there were people neither you nor I could save."

"You're right..."

"But that burden isn't yours to bear. You *did* do your best. And the one who is ultimately responsible for it all is the one who sits on the throne: me." The expression on Dean's face was one of resolve—as if he had tried to swallow up all of his sadness and anger at once. His tone was the same as the one I'd grown so used to hearing back in Armelia.

"De—" I started to say his name.

But the wry smile on his face stopped me. It was like he was telling me to go no further.

"May I ask something?" he asked.

"What do you wish to ask, Your Highness?"

"Would you grant the kingdom's officials the chance to learn at Armelia's academy of higher learning?"

I had to let out a chuckle at the sudden change of topic. "Local and national governments are very different. I'm not sure how helpful they would find the courses at the academy..."

"I believe it is important for the monarchy to learn from local governments. Besides, that's not all they can learn at the academy. They should be educated in far more than bureaucratic policy."

"I see. Forgive me for saying this, but there is still a shortage of teachers in Armelia. It would be quite difficult for us to take on kingdom officials at this point."

"I'm not saying I'd send them all at once. I could assign them in small groups, just as you do with the Armelian officials. And I think it would be best for them to study for a fixed period of time, like an exchange program."

"I see. Well, it would depend on how many officials and for how long. Allow me to consult with the headmaster."

“Thank you.”

“I think you should bring this opportunity up with Berne as well, since sooner or later, he will become governor of Armelia.”

“Are you resigning...?”

“Yes. I’m a woman, after all. Sooner or later, I’ll have to go off and get married.” I didn’t even mean to blurt it out. But it was already a foregone conclusion in my mind. My heart just hadn’t caught up yet. Perhaps that was why the words fell so naturally from my mouth.

Dean looked shocked. “You’re saying yes to his proposal?”

His expression was so serious, and that shocked *me*. But I supposed it was only natural for the first prince, the future king of this nation, to know everything that happened within the borders of his kingdom.

Why in the world had I brought it up in the first place?

I debated long and hard over whether to deny it, even so. At last, I forced out a word. “Yes...”

“I see...”

That was his only response. A reaction neither negative nor positive. Just a reaction. But to me, it sounded as if he approved.

The shock of that filled me with sadness. How unbelievably selfish of me. I was the one who’d brought it up, so what right did I have to be heartbroken? I couldn’t stand it. Somewhere deep within me, I had hoped he might object...and ask me to be with him instead. That shallow desire made me sick with myself.

“What is it?” asked Dean.

That was the second time he’d asked me that in this courtyard. That simple inquiry, and our solitude, just went to show how terribly I’d let down my guard.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. But is that all?” I asked.

“What?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I haven’t been feeling well lately... So if you’ll excuse me.” I stood up, forcing the meeting to an end.

I bowed, then fled the courtyard. *Why?* I thought, again and again, and I blamed myself the entire time.

Hadn't I learned anything from Ed? Love makes everyone a fool. You fall and you fall, until you drown. You hope that happens to the one you love as well. You hope they fall and drown as terribly as you do —no, even more. You want them to lose themselves so hopelessly in you that they can't even breathe.

That's what I wished for. Without even considering his feelings, I had done the same thing again. I got my hopes up and then grew upset when things didn't go my way. I was pouting like a child whose toy had been taken away.

At some point I realized that Tanya was walking behind me. She must have followed me the moment I left the courtyard. She didn't say a word; she just silently shadowed my footsteps.

Once I reached a spot near the entrance, I stopped. Even though my heart felt so heavy with emotion, for some reason, my chest felt lighter than usual. I reached up to my bosom.

I lost it! I always wore my pocket watch around my neck, except for when I wore low-cut dresses to parties, but it was gone. Lost. The revelation made every last drop of blood drain from my face.

"My lady?" Tanya paused, concerned.

"Tanya, I'm sorry...but I forgot my pocket watch back there. Will you go back and get it for me?"

"But..."

"Please. I can't lose it, no matter what. But I also can't go back there. I'll stay here and wait. Please." I was fully aware that I was revealing more weakness than I ever usually did. But I could not leave this pocket watch behind, especially now of all times.

"All right. Stay here then, my lady." Tanya hesitated a bit before leaving my side, but she finally relented.

"I will." I watched her go and obediently waited for her. I placed a hand on my chest. That gesture had become such a habit of mine. Honestly, though, what was I hoping for? Even if the pocket watch were returned to me, what would it do? Looking back on those happy times would only grieve me further.

I stared absently out at the garden until I felt someone approaching me. I thought it was unusual that Tanya had come back so soon, but when I turned around, I laid eyes on Dean.

Before I could even ask what he was doing there, he took me by the hand and started to walk. This unusual assertiveness filled me with confusion. He pulled me into a nearby empty room and let go of my hand.

“Dean!” I finally said the name that had been so difficult for me to articulate before.

He held something out toward me. “Here.”

It was the pocket watch I’d sent Tanya back for.

“You picked it up for me? Thank you.” I looked at him, waiting to take it back. Then I suddenly remembered I’d called him by his name, just like I’d done before. “...Forgive me, Your Highness, for addressing you so rudely.”

The moment I said that, a sad and troubled smile spread across his face. “I thought perhaps you left this behind because you didn’t need it anymore.”

“Your Highness...”

“Are you *really* going to say yes?”

It took me a moment to realize what he was referring to. When I did, I looked into his eyes. They looked so weak, as weak as his voice when he asked me that question. I’d never seen him like this before.

Without thinking, I reached up to caress his cheek. I’d forgotten every bit of decorum, it seemed.

“I’m sorry for asking such a question,” he said as he placed his hand over mine.

“No... No.”

Dean wanted to know if I was serious. That was why he’d come after me, to ask again. That was more than enough for me. His eyes said more than his mouth ever could. He was so conflicted that he couldn’t even say it out loud.

“As the future king, I should be congratulating you. This union could be of no greater benefit to this kingdom.” It almost sounded as if he were making an excuse to himself. “And yet...”

No other words were necessary. Or rather, my good sense was telling me I couldn’t let him continue. My love was nothing more than a burden to him.

First of all, he was right; a marriage between an Acacian prince and House Armelia would greatly benefit the kingdom. I hadn't thought of a single reason to turn down the prince's offer. Furthermore, staying in Armelia would never bring me any advantages. I was Ed's former fiancée, a man who was currently jailed on suspicion of treason. Even though our engagement had been broken long ago, it would still forever be associated with my name.

So even if I were to become engaged to the first prince, there would surely be nobles who objected, even among those close to him. Although, it was possible that the noble closest to him, Rudy, would think it only natural for me to marry Dean, when you considered the influence and power of our family.

But it was far too risky for Dean to choose me. He was to become the next king, and I was a liability. If I became his fiancée, House Armelia would in time turn into the next House Marea, whether we liked it or not. Moreover, the people would fear that the nobility was once more controlling the monarchy, which would only serve to weaken the royal family's authority. Discord remained among the nobility, and the situation in the kingdom was in disarray. I couldn't possibly permit myself to plant more seeds of strife.

Even if I weren't such a problematic choice, there were always other women, many far more suitable as a match for a king—someone who would be of greater political benefit. I had known it all along. I knew it. I just didn't want to admit it. No matter what.

"Dean." I whispered his name. He lifted his gaze and met mine. "You were already mine a long time ago, weren't you?" I asked.

His eyes opened wide with surprise, but then he smiled.

"Yes, I was."



My entire body trembled with happiness. That was enough for me. Now I knew he felt the same for me as I did for him.

“You’re a cog in the wheel of this kingdom,” I said. “And so am I. We aren’t meant to collide. Even if we travel down different paths, we’ll continue on in the same direction. So, knowing that, I can go anywhere and do anything.”

I stepped away from him. “I’m so deeply grateful for your feelings, Your Highness. And so, I’ll take those feelings as a parting gift as I offer myself up for the greater good of my domain, and our kingdom.”

Now it was time to say farewell, selfishly, to my selfish feelings. It was profoundly self-serving. But I couldn’t bear to see him like this any longer.

Dean didn’t say anything else.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness.”

With that, I left him. I went out of the room and returned to where I had been waiting before. Tanya was already there.

“Tanya.”

“My lady!” she cried out, which was unusual for her—she must have been concerned when I wasn’t where she’d left me.

“I’m sorry I left without a word.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe, my lady. Please forgive me. I was unable to find your pocket watch. I shall come back to look for it after I escort you home in the carriage.”

“Don’t worry, Tanya. Actually, I looked in my dress again, and I realized it was caught on the fabric. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize. I’m just glad you found it, my lady.”

“Thanks. Ah, Tanya? Will you follow me, no matter where I go?”

“Of course!”

“I see.”

I wondered if I would ever regret this decision. I was certain I would. If that time ever came, I was sure I would wonder what would have happened if I’d made another choice. But right now, this was the best decision for me. I had to trust in that and move forward. Because I’d just said goodbye to my sweet dream.

After that, Tanya and I returned to the mansion in the carriage. Strangely, I felt calm.

However, once I returned home, for some reason, the air was tense.

Am I nervous to tell my family my decision? I wondered as I headed toward my father.

“Iris, I’m glad you’re home.” My mother’s stern tone almost took my breath away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Tweil has sent soldiers across the border. The war has started once again.”

My entire mind went blank.

Deep in a jail reserved for those of the upper-class, where other nobles were held prisoner... Yuri was also held. She stared absently out the barred window. Sometimes, she would mutter to herself.

“What’s all this commotion in the castle? You, over there. You go check and see what’s going on.”

But there was no one there. There was never anyone else in the room besides her, other than to bring her meals or a change of clothes.

“Oh, I see! So everything’s going according to plan!”

She didn’t seem bothered that she received no answer. Within her mind, she was giving orders to an invisible lady-in-waiting, who had just left the room to carry out those orders.

“Divan, I knew you would come for me. Yes, I know. That’s right. There’s no way you would abandon me. The first prince is so full of nonsense.” Yuri smiled with relief.

“You’re just a doll. A doll that Divan made.” He—the first prince—had scornfully said that in her ear. *“A sad, sad doll abandoned by her maker. I heard that Divan left the capital long ago, along with his cronies.”*

These were the words she had uttered before she let out that scream in the chamber.

Divan left the capital? she thought. *He abandoned me?!*

But that didn't matter anymore. Because...

"This kingdom will be destroyed soon anyway. I was foolish to become so attached to becoming its queen." She laughed to herself. "Now hurry up and come get me, Divan."

But as always, there was no one to hear her mutterings.

Afterword

VOLUME 4. I can't believe the story got this far. I'm so grateful to all of my readers. It's been almost two years since I first published this story on the internet. Even writing that sentence makes me feel nostalgic. It's surprising how fast time flies, isn't it? Time passes by so quickly after you become an adult, compared to when you were a child. I heard that long ago, but lately I really feel as if it's true.

To change the subject, recently, one of my friends asked how I got the idea for this story in the first place. Actually, it came to me before I fell asleep. The idea just popped into my head one night, and I quickly jotted down the gist of it and filled in the details later. Since I wrote it down before I slept, there were some things on the paper which didn't make much sense to me when I read it again. I tried to decipher the notes, but I had no luck at all. It made me wish I were a codebreaker. But for a code to work, the maker of the code has to make it decipherable in the first place!

Anyway, there were many things from my original notes that proved difficult to fit into the story, once I actually started writing it. The fact that the story has come this far is really a testament to the readers who have supported me this whole time, and I'd like to use this opportunity to thank you all.

To Haduki Futaba, thank you so much for your wonderful illustrations. Every time I see Futaba-san's drawings, they exceed my imagination. My characters have truly come to life. It inspires me to write even more.

To Suki Umemiya, thank you so much for an incredible manga. This time, Volume 4 of the light novel and Volume 2 of the manga were published simultaneously, so I was really looking forward to that. It's an honor to see a story I've written come out in manga form.

I'd also like to thank my editor for all their wonderful advice. And to my friends and family, thank you for all of your support.

Finally, to my readers. Thank you so much for buying this book. I only made it this far thanks to all of your support and encouragement. Thank you. I'll do my very best to make sure we meet again in the next

volume.

—REIA



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